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“TO LIVE OUTSIDE THE LAW, YOU MUST BE HONEST”
-- WORDS, WALLS, AND THE RHETORICAL PRACTICES
OF *THE ANGOLITE*

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by
Scott Howard Whiddon
B.A., Winthrop University, 1996
M.F.A/M.A., McNeese State University, 1999
December 2006

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To the staff of *The Angolite* –
past, present, and future.

“You don’t fool with Angola or LSU if you’ve got good sense.”

– Gov. Earl K. Long, quoted in the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*,
January 9, 1966 by a close political associate of Long’s six years after his death.
(Carleton 167)

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There were other central figures that helped me understand both *The Angolite* and the larger world of prison culture. Dr. John Robson of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary played an important role in my access to Louisiana State Penitentiary. Burk Foster, recently retired from University of Louisiana-Lafayette and an expert on corrections policy and Angola history, was kind enough to grant me two extended interviews and provided me with a wealth of primary materials for future research projects. The Special Collections staff at Hill Memorial Library was also incredibly helpful in providing both documents and workspace that were needed for this project.

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Abstract

“To Live Outside the Law, You Must Be Honest”: Words, Walls, and the Rhetorical Practices of The Angolite examines the 50 year history of *The Angolite*, a news magazine published and edited by inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary. While *The Angolite* and the efforts of former editor Wilbert Rideau have been discussed in the public media, especially here in Louisiana, my dissertation is the first extended scholarly account of this prison publication. Specifically, I examine how inmate writers held in one of the most historically violent penitentiaries in the United States choose to represent themselves, their multiple literacies, and their own understanding of such issues as inmate educational opportunities and prison rape. Such literacy practices are framed by the fact that the majority of inmates at Angola read below fifth-grade level and that educational opportunities behind bars are few. Via rhetorical analysis and ethnographic accounts, I show how these writers attempt to engage in public sphere discussions of human rights, literacy, ethics, and the history of incarceration. As a whole, these writings create a counter-identity that challenges the dominant conception of prisoners in the United States. In short, *Angolite* staff members write to become something other than *other*.

Chapter One: Where It All Begins – An Introduction

In the Introduction to his biography of Huey Long, historian T. Harry Williams notes that the exact seed of a book, the catalyst that drives a writer to begin an extended project, can become somewhat vague over time. Perhaps the same can be said of a scholarly project. This dissertation – a rhetorical analysis of *The Angolite* – began almost three years ago. It commenced as an ethnographically informed project, drawing upon interviews, observations, and field notes with current staff members as well as other participants such as prison officials and a frequent outside contributor. Later, for various reasons that I discuss in my interchapters, my project emerged as a rhetorical analysis of the actual issues of *The Angolite*. The entire story of *The Angolite* is far from complete, and I am told that a history of the esteemed publication is currently being drafted by one of its most lauded (and recently released) contributors, Wilbert Rideau; like many others who champion both the work of this unique publication as well as long-needed reforms in prison policy at the local, state, and federal levels, I look forward to its eventual printing.

There are also other projects underway that concern *The Angolite*. On February 8, 2006, the Open Society Institute and Soros Foundations Network awarded Dr. Linda LaBranche one of 17 Justice Fellowship Grants to study the 25-year impact of *The Angolite* on inmates both inside and outside of Louisiana. LaBranche was a key figure in the 19-year advocacy effort for Wilbert Rideau, the most famous member of *The Angolite* staff, whom I introduce in Chapter Two. LaBranche also co-founded the Rideau Project at Loyola University – a project that worked to gain widespread support for Rideau's release. The sheer financial amount of a Justice Grant – between \$45,000 and \$76,000 – attests to both the interest in and the importance of *The Angolite*.

According to OSI Director Antonio Maciel, “The fellowship program not only complements and deepens OSI’s justice reform work, but also contributes to the development and recognition of leaders in this field.”¹ My project sets the stage for other projects such as LaBranche’s in that I draw upon *Angolite* staffers who are less well known than Rideau. This choice allows us to see the work of *The Angolite* as the product of several generations of writers and works against notions that can position literacy as a completely solitary endeavor. More importantly, my project focuses on literacy and offers a reconsideration of the concept of literacy as potentially transformative.

To widen the lens a bit, prison writing in general has increasingly become a legitimate academic study in recent years. At least five anthologies of prison writing have been published in the past decade. The PEN prison-writing program is flourishing. Notable American fiction writer Tobias Wolff included two stories by inmate-writers in his edited anthology *The Best New American Voices*. The most recent edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* contains a selection of contemporary prison literature. In terms of scholarly work, collections such as *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* have recently been published. While none of these works include *The Angolite* or prison journalistic work in general, the increased publication of anthologies and scholarly collections that are concerned with prison writing indicate a growing interest in a world that, for far too long, has been kept from our immediate vantage point and ignored for its impact on literacy.

The Angolite is a news publication written and edited entirely by inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. In Chapter Two, I provide a brief history of the news publication as a segue into an analysis of recent issues of *The Angolite*, but some initial comments might be helpful for readers. The publication began in 1953 as, essentially, a one-man operation; editions were

¹ For further information, see http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/news/justice_20060208

cheaply mimeographed and distributed mainly within Angola. However, letters from readers outside Angola's confines show that the publication did indeed have an outside readership. Unfortunately, according to current *Angolite* staffers, there are no detailed records that account for subscriptions or print runs for the early years of this publication. Articles during this era of *The Angolite* mostly centered on events specific to the immediate body of inmates and chronicled events ranging from penal farm crop developments to parole board reports. There are also a number of articles that are less journalistic in nature; these pieces encourage inmates to make use of the few rehabilitative programs available at the time and are geared towards inspiration. Although the audience invoked by these early issues seems to be the writer's fellow inmates at Angola, it is clear by his choices of topics and published letters to the publication that there were readers outside of Angola – at other institutions as well as in the “free world” (a term I will use quite often in this study; while certain postmodernists might shudder at the term, the “free world” or “the world” is a term used by inmates to allude to those outside the prison world). From the earliest issues until the 1970s, this publication essentially remained the same in terms of coverage; in the 1960s, *The Angolite* was mainly a series of columns submitted by writers in various parts of the prison (i.e., various medium security dormitories, outcamps, etc.). Reports of various inmate clubs such as the Angola Jaycees were quite common. However, considering the violent nature of Louisiana State Penitentiary at this time, these editions hold some interest in that they attempt to provide a meaningful forum for inmate creative writing and a communicative link between the various parts of the prison.

1975 was a watershed year for *The Angolite*; Warden C. Paul Phelps, in response to federal prompts to end the violence at his prison, gave the publication freedoms that were unheard of in any other prison publication at the time. Contributors were free to investigate

whatever it wanted, pending that stories were documented and that no critiques were made of employees who were not in administrative positions (see Morris, Chapter 16). This was also the era of Angola desegregation, a topic that I take up in Chapter Four. The general tenor of *The Angolite* changed; coverage was much more weighty than reports on inmate events, although those topics were still present and positioned as important. Wilbert Rideau, Billy Wayne Sinclair, and the other staffers of this period brought a degree of sophistication and depth to the publication, and soon *The Angolite* (and Rideau as well) became what is arguably the most famous prison publication in the history of the United States. Currently, *The Angolite* is edited by Kerry Myers and has a staff of eight full time writers; many Angola inmates who are not full time staffers contribute articles as well as poetry and short fiction.

Perhaps some general information about the circulation of *The Angolite* is needed here. As of May 2006, there are 1,188 *Angolite* subscribers outside of Louisiana State Penitentiary. 1,800 copies of each edition are also distributed to Angola inmates; inmates tend to share copies of each issue, which would account for many more actual readers than the number of copies distributed would imply. Inmates in state and federal institutions aside from LSP currently hold twenty-one subscriptions; it can be argued that this number would be greater if not for certain restrictions on inmate publications that vary from prison to prison. While specific subscription statistics from year to year are unavailable, current editor Kerry Myers claims that the highest number of *Angolite* subscribers was approximately 1,250, although Morris notes that there were nearly 4,000 subscribers in 1996 (189). 741 of the current subscribers live outside of Louisiana, and there are 9 subscribers outside of the United States. However, letters to the editor published in *The Angolite* reflect the popularity of this publication overseas.

Forty-six of the total 1,188 current subscriptions are held by public or academic libraries ranging from the United States Supreme Court to high schools in over forty states. Again, while there are no available records on the number of libraries that subscribed to *The Angolite* from year to year, Myers (recalling conversations with former editor Wilbert Rideau) believes that *Angolite* subscriptions to such institutions increased significantly during the late 1980s and 1990s, leveled off until the late 1990s, and then began a slow and steady increase from 2000 until the present. It is probable that subscription rates from individual readers as well as libraries and other institutions grew in proportion to Rideau's increased public media appearances (see Chapter Four) on such television programs as *20/20* and *Nightline* and because of his involvement in the Sundance Award winning and Oscar nominated documentary *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison*.

It is uncertain how many of the total *Angolite* staff from 1953 until 2006 had formal training in writing or research; according to the current staff, no records are easily available on such matters. It stands to reason that until recently, based on discussions of educational issues within *The Angolite* itself, very few of the inmates who contributed to the news magazine had any college level writing training. Wilbert Rideau, like former co-editors Ron Wikberg and Billy Wayne Sinclair, has discussed his own efforts toward self-education behind bars on several occasions during his years of media appearances and published articles. He has also discussed how *The Angolite* was not given any meaningful outside help in terms of training or writing instruction. As Rideau noted in a May/June 1977 editorial, "We've never had any professional assistance in the publishing of this rag. No teachers, no nothing. It's always been a learn-as-you-go, trial and error operation." (4).² In terms of the current staff, two writers have had some

² According to www.wilbertrideau.com, a website that provided information on trial updates and support from various political groups, Rideau claims to have had a correspondence with Clover Swann, a young New York editor,

college level training and all eight staffers have either a high school diploma or a General Education Degree; many of these degrees were earned while serving prison sentences.³ This statistic does not account for inmates who contribute to *The Angolite* but are not full-time staff members.

The penal press – a term used by historians such as Morris or journalists such as Baird to refer to all prison news publications past and present – is now essentially extinct, a drastic change from the first half of this century when most federal prisons provided at least some sort of publication opportunity for inmates. Yet *The Angolite* has continued to publish both journalistic and literary texts written by inmates for over five decades. It provides a forum where inmates at Angola as well as those held at other penitentiaries can express their ideas and creative endeavors. It documents changes in legal policy and keeps readers updated on books that discuss the nature and history of the American penitentiary system; it also provides narrative accounts of events and individuals in the specific Angola community. It challenges the dominant image of inmates as worthless and unable to contribute anything positive to their fellow prisoners or to the world beyond the prison gates. It posits critiques of prison policy and, at times, argues for reforms that recognize the reason for confinement. These articles do not explicitly argue for their authors' innocence or release yet show how prison policies and practices often do little more than perpetuate a theatre of violence and despair; we will see this latter discussion played out in Chapter Five, where I analyze *Angolite* discussions of inmate sexual practices including its coverage of AIDS issues as well as inmate rape. Most importantly, *The Angolite* provides a sliver of hope and agency for its writers and inmate readers in a place that, by design, removes

during his time on Death Row. However, little is publicly known about the nature of this correspondence and no letters have been made available. See also Rideau, "Why Prisons Don't Work."

³ Kerry Myers provided these subscription statistics and details about staff members during my fieldwork at LSP.

all choice and power from the men and women that are contained there. While words such as *connection*, *transformation*, and even *redemption* are held as somewhat suspect in the world of the academy and, in particular, studies of literacy, such themes are not only present in the pages of *The Angolite* but indeed are the cornerstones of its existence.

This project explores *The Angolite* as a force of resistance against the brutal and numbing nature of the prison system and highlights some of its basic themes in light of the New Literacy Studies – specifically, its emphasis on local acts of literacy within specific contexts. There have been many investigations of how literacy is used by disenfranchised communities (for example, Heath; Moss; Cushman; Brandt). Other scholars, such as Denny Taylor, have shown how literacy (such as the language of court records or government documents) is used as a sorting device that maintains an inequitable class system and perpetuates the socio-economic status quo. Yet there are few studies that look at literacy acts that take place within prison communities. Scholars such as Eleanor Novek, Anita Wilson, and Deborah Brandt have either written about their teaching experiences behind bars or have offered scholarly accounts that are drawn from the prison world; they are fundamental to my work, to be sure, and I discuss these studies in Chapter Three. However, in these small but strong ranks, the practice of writing and publishing a prison news publication is only considered by Novek, and none of these scholars draw their research from a prison with such a brutal history as Angola.

Consider the following handful of facts and figures:

1. According to the most recent data provided by the United States Department of Justice/Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were 2,135, 901 prisoners held in federal, state, or local jails as of December 31, 2004. Since 1995, the prison population in the United States has increased on average by 3% each year.

2. For every 100,000 black males in this country, 3,218 are currently serving prison sentences.
3. 68% of state penitentiary inmates do not hold a high school diploma.
4. According to the 1994 National Adult Literacy Survey, 7 out of 10 inmates “are apt to experience difficulty in performing tasks that require them to integrate or synthesize information from complex of lengthy texts” (xviii). Inmate literacy abilities are “substantially lower than those of the household population” (xviii).
5. During the 1980s and 1990s, almost all educational opportunities for inmates – including classes in reading and writing – lost funding. Tax revenue spent on inmate education was seen as a waste. Congress also eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners in 1994 via the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcing Act, which resulted in “a significant decrease in access, quality, and success” of prison education programming across the board. (Welsh 157). During the congressional meetings that discussed the changes in Pell Grant allocation, a state judge argued vehemently that inmates did not deserve any form of higher education and that they only deserved to be completely removed from society (Chlup).
6. All inmate writings – both public and private – are subject to seizure at any time (Kleinfield 90-91).

These figures and statements, while indeed telling and, to me, fairly shocking, are faceless; like most of our cultural understanding of incarceration (a topic discussed by Sloop; see Chapter Two), they reduce the rapidly growing prison population to a mere set of statistics and stereotypes. Texts such as *The Angolite* attempt to put a face on the world of prison. It is a highly complex literacy project that exists in what might be seen as the most unlikely of places –

one of America's most historically infamous prisons. Mark Carleton's *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System*, another work that informs my own examination of *The Angolite*, traces the brutal landscape of Angola as well as its absolute lack of serious, sustained rehabilitative efforts during the vast majority of its history. He shows that the state of Louisiana was far more concerned that the prison could sustain itself economically through such practices as the leasing of inmates for labor and keeping food and shelter costs to a minimum than with rehabilitative or educational programming. While Angola's present state is certainly an improvement from its bloody and violent past, it still lacks meaningful outside support for literacy education, and its rehabilitative efforts – mostly tied to the neo-conservative Christian movement – are fairly problematic.

The Angolite does not wield the political force that other literacy projects do; it cannot make laws on its own, nor does it represent a group of people who have had educational or economic advantages that allow for social mobility. Prisoners, as the writings of *The Angolite* as well as the work of inmate novelists, poets, and essayists assert, are ultimately at the mercy of the state. However, *The Angolite* does attempt to provide inmates who are completely divided from the world a sense of connection, a sense of meaning. As a publication, it empowers its writers while offering a sense of visibility and representation to its inmate audience. My study posits that although literacy is indeed a force that divides social classes and maintains the economic status quo, literacy can still provide some sense of transformation and connection that is important, especially in the world of the maximum security penitentiary; my study also reflects the intense need to honestly inspect our penal system as it relates to literacy as well as poverty and racial friction. It is my sincere hope that this study will prompt other scholars to examine the

world that exists behind bars and barbed wire, a world whose population is growing at a frighteningly rapid rate.

In order to address such topics as literacy, rehabilitation, power, and identity, my analysis asks the following questions:

1. What topics are typically found in *The Angolite*? What have these men written about over the years?
2. How might *The Angolite* function as a text of resistance against the totalizing nature of prisons in the United States?⁴
3. How might an analysis of *The Angolite* in its contemporary and historical context contribute to the debate concerning the transformative power of literacy?
4. Could *The Angolite* function as a possible model of literacy education in other contexts?

To explore these concerns, I examined the complete editions of *The Angolite* from 1953 to 2003 that were available in Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University. I pay particular attention to articles published between 1970 and 1990.⁵ These issues were published during *The Angolite*'s most popular era; however, in Chapter Two, I focus on more recent issues to help contextualize this publication and to account for the beginnings of the post-Rideau era of *The Angolite*. While Rideau is indeed a central figure in *The Angolite*'s development and popularity and deserves a study that is dedicated to his writings alone, I want to show throughout this study that *The Angolite* is more than just one man. Finally, I choose to focus on more recent *Angolite*

⁴ Barbara Harlow defines "resistance literature" as writing which "calls attention to itself...as a political and politicized activity" and that "sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production." (28-29). The process of writing and publishing texts such as *The Angolite* in the larger prison context of silence and invisibility certainly constitutes a politically subversive act.

⁵ 2003 is the most recent year that LSU Hill Memorial Library has of a complete edition.

issues in Chapter Two so that I might draw upon the relationships I established with the current staff during my field research.

In examining whole issues and specific articles, I considered the following questions as a way of uncovering themes and concerns that are pertinent to *The Angolite*'s mission:

1. What occasion gives rise to the need or opportunity for composition?
2. How does this writer establish personal credibility or convey authority?
3. What is the intention of writing in specific cases? What goals are stated or implied?
4. Who is the intended audience, and what audience values does the writer or writers appeal to?
5. What are the principle lines of reasoning used in *Angolite* articles? How do writers appeal to reason and/or emotion?
6. What figures of speech/tropes are used?
7. What does the nature of the writing reveal about the culture that produced it?

Again, this project initially began as an ethnography of current *Angolite* staff members – a study where the members of this small but important community of writers would be viewed as experts who understand the day-to-day practices of their own culture and space. As noted by the late Wendy Bishop, ethnographic writing researchers “attempt to understand the learning-to-write situation from the learner’s point of view” (4). What initially drew me to this project was the question of location. Why do inmates write? What do they write about? And, specifically, why do inmates serving life-sentences wish to pursue journalistic writing for publication? How do the layers of surveillance and discipline, as well as the opportunity for publication, affect these writers and their composing process? What role does writing – especially the political writing that is focused on highly debated topics as often found within the pages of *The Angolite* – play

into the societal scene of Louisiana State Penitentiary? I spent five months traveling back and forth from Baton Rouge to Angola, usually two trips a week for five or six hours. In October, the final month that I was a guest of LSP, I also came up on Sundays to observe staff members covering the Angola Rodeo. I knew that I could never be seen by *Angolite* staffers or Angola inmates in general as a complete “insider” (or, as one of my dissertation committee members once put it, as “a piece of the furniture”) for obvious reasons; at the end of the day, I would always leave Angola behind me and drive back to Baton Rouge. Yet developing relationships with these writers – especially Kerry Myers, Lane Nelson, and Jeffery Hillburn – was a crucial component of my understanding of *The Angolite* and the culture and history of Louisiana State Penitentiary.

This study is also, in many ways, a historical account of *The Angolite* as a community of practice. Historical accounts of literacy, according to Cushman et al., were some of the first studies in this field that attracted scholarly interest. Such studies, especially in the 1960’s, investigated examples of writing that might seem far from the belletristic center of traditional literary studies: wills, marriage registers, military records, newspapers and magazines and handbills, and other forms of writing. While this work initially began as quantitative research – exploring such questions as literacy rates and even the beginnings of professional writing research – studies became more and more involved with understanding the socioeconomic distribution of literacy (a change that parallels what has been called “the social turn” in a wide range of disciplines: “a research orientation to look beyond the individual to the social, cultural, and political contexts in which people live their lives” [Cushman et al., 3]). Like many historical approaches to literacy, this study both resists claiming grand, sweeping historical effects and values the work of literacy practices of populations (in this case, prisoners) who are often

excluded from standard treatments of Americans as literate people. While my project involves a historical account of *The Angolite* – specifically focusing on issues produced during the 1970’s and 1980’s – it is important to remember that *Angolite* staffers are still writing, still publishing, still reaching out to both inmate and “free” readers and subscribers. My study, then, addresses the notion of “literacy” through the situated event of *The Angolite*, which is composed in a highly unique and power structured set of circumstances.⁶

Finally, this project draws upon critical discourse analysis. My research questions and my close reading of *Angolite* editions available in the Hill Memorial Library archives allowed for the emergence of various themes and patterns. Representations of collaboration and of inmates contributing to both their immediate community as well as the outside world can be found throughout the history of this publication but especially during the 1970s and 1980s; these writers perform an identity that radically challenges what outside readers might presuppose about inmates in a place marked by a long history of violence. By that same notion, these writers also discuss a range of immediate and long-term problems that are indicative of penitentiary life. *Angolite* articles have discussed acts of violence, the history of the death penalty and the brutality of the electric chair, the concerns of a rapidly increasing population of elderly inmates, and other issues that need to be addressed by state and federal authorities. In Chapter Five, I focus on *The Angolite*’s discussions of prison sexualities and the practice of inmate rape not only because of the popularity of Rideau’s “The Sexual Jungle” (perhaps the defining work on this topic) but also because of the public’s apparent fascination with such a brutal practice. There are other themes and patterns to be addressed in later work, to be sure: I hope to collaborate with a legal scholar in

⁶ Anita Wilson defines the “situated” view of literacy/ies as “where multiplicities of reading, writing, and literacy-related activities are contextualized within everyday life” (“Four Days” 70). This definition is grounded in Brian Street’s ideological model of literacy/ies as well as with other proponents of New Literacy Studies. See Chapter Three for more information.

the future to analyze how these writers over the years have discussed court cases and legal documents; furthermore, the power of the drawings and photographs that have been a distinct feature of this publication deserve more than the brief attention I give them in Chapter Two.

I also attempt to articulate the concerns of *Angolite* writers by tracing their work via historical accounts of American penitentiaries – especially Mark Carleton’s brilliant history of Louisiana prisons and punishment. I take into account responses to *The Angolite* at both the national and state level. I immersed myself in the world of *The Angolite* as a body of writing, with much help from the Special Collections librarians at Louisiana State University’s Hill Memorial Library. By describing the rhetorical history of *The Angolite* as well as public and state media reactions to its work and, at times, its national popularity, we can get a keen sense of these writers and how their work not only informs non-inmate readers of life within a totalizing space but also allows them to create a creative and intellectual space despite such totalizing forces.

This project, therefore, draws upon several methodologies that are current in rhetoric and composition studies. My ethnographic work certainly informs my understanding of both prison writing and culture and, specifically, the role of literacies within Louisiana State Penitentiary. The four months I spent in the *Angolite* office and participating in a discussion group with inmate-tutors helped me gain a deeper understanding of why and how inmates employ reading and writing. However, I need to be very clear as to some methodological choices I made during this particular time. In order to help establish trust, I specifically chose not to record interviews during these first few months; while I had been granted verbal permission by *Angolite* administrators to record and transcribe interviews with inmates, I realized during my initial meetings with both *Angolite* staffers and inmate-tutors that it would take some time for any of

these men to feel comfortable in a tape-recorded interview situation. In a place such as prison, where outsider visits are incredibly rare, these feelings seem warranted. Therefore, I took rough notes during sessions and transcribed them in the evenings after my visits. By the fourth month of my visits to Angola, the participants and I had begun talking about the possibility of recording sessions. Many inmates were willing; some seemed fearful that the tapes could be used against them. Because the nature of my research design changed radically – a narrative I develop in the final interchapter – I was never able to tape record interviews; I am left with notes and recollections. These notes are the basis for the interchapters that are placed between the more formal, academic chapters – a tactic that I borrow from such writer/scholars as Ruth Behar and Joseph Harris. I represent passages of dialogue with italics; they are not direct quotations, but they adhere to the spirit of my conversations with inmates and administrative staff members.

I call these interchapters “counts”: the “count” is a defining aspect in the daily life of prisoners in state and federal penitentiaries. At Angola, inmates are counted several times a day by guards to help ensure against escapes. Usually, the inmates are called by their inmate number – and sometimes by their last name. I watched dozens of “counts” occur, with inmates lined up in rows of two as they entered the fields that surround the prison’s main complex; my own strategy, here, of “counting,” is an attempt to account for the personal – the aspects that are effectively excised via the numbing process of anonymity that is a large part of the prison experience. In each “count,” I try to give readers a better sense of Angola as a place, of inmates as individuals, of the world where *The Angolite* has successfully operated for over five decades. Again, these counts and the italicized sections of dialogue are not from taped conversations. While there are problematic elements that come with any academic project that attempts to

“speak for” a marginalized group, the interchapters are an attempt to critically reflect on my time as a researcher exploring a space marked by unequal relations of power and agency.

*

Yet despite Williams’ remarks that I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction and the effacing effects of time, as well as several changes in my research strategy and design, I know exactly how my task was born. South Louisiana is a site of contradiction – of beauty and sadness, of oddities that can both please and shock the outside observer. It is a space where Saturday night and Sunday morning, or even Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday, are not too far apart; revelry and religion go hand in hand. By the time I began this research, I had lived in Louisiana for five years – in Lake Charles, New Orleans, and, finally, Baton Rouge. I had fallen under the spell of South Louisiana’s charm and, in certain locales, its almost Caribbean manner of pace and practices. While many of my peers and, later on, fellow graduate students, failed to see the wonder in, for example, the lush swampland or a rural Mardi Gras or the three-quarter time spin of a Cajun waltz, I tried to seek out all I could about South Louisiana. Through the help of some good friends who were native to this place, I was allowed to see the Louisiana that existed away from the interstate, the strip mall, and the chemical plant. I owe them much of my happiness.

Not all of South Louisiana, though, holds the romantic notions of zydeco music in a field or blooming crepe myrtles and magnolia trees; some events reminded me of how much of an outsider I was despite my attempts at blending in. In the fall of 2002, I was invited to attend the Louisiana State Prison Rodeo with a group of friends. At the time, I was debating leaving graduate school entirely, for I failed to see how I would make a life out of studying and teaching literature – even the Southern literature that I loved and still find both challenging and life-

enriching – considering the radically shrinking market for college-level literature teachers. As we rolled towards Angola – a place that, like many people, including native Louisianans, I had heard and read about but knew very little of – I talked to my friends about possibly leaving the state for good and abandoning my hopes at a college teaching career. Yet I knew that writing – one of the most difficult of acts – was indeed important and a way of both preserving and sustaining an identity while reaching towards the possibility of connection and even social change. Little did I know that an amazing example of writing as community-of-practice was waiting for me just past the main gates of Louisiana State Penitentiary.

I am still uncertain exactly why I wanted to attend an event that is almost completely focused on inmates performing dangerous activities such as bull riding, cattle wrestling, and “convict poker” for an arena packed with mostly white spectators in the first place.⁷ Perhaps it was the sheer oddity of the event, the strangeness of opening a small part of such a closed space as a prison to the general public – students, local residents, biker gang members, and tourists from as far as Texas and Alabama – even though I already found such a practice ethically problematic. In Chapter Two, I take some time to describe the rodeo and how scholars and *Angolite* writers discuss the rodeo and its effects on the Angola community. When I think about the beginnings of my project, my thoughts return to the moments of that day: the thick tangles of live oaks and limp moss that give way to white pines; the gates of LSP that mark where a state highway literally “dead ends”; the presence of the first tower that guards the main gates where cars and trucks and motorcycles were backed up for at least a mile, all waiting to enter the arena and watch inmates risk their lives for the chance at forty or fifty dollars and the applause of a crowd.

⁷ According to the LSP website, as of 1999 77.8% of Angola inmates are African-American.

As my friends and I walked around the arts and crafts area, where incarcerated artists sell their leatherwork, paintings, carvings, and other objects while other inmates look on through an eight-foot tall chain link fence (a reversal of Ezra Pound's image of the metro, perhaps, with a sea of black faces instead of white petals), I saw a group of tables set under a small sign that read "The Angolite." I walked over, said hello to a man I would later know was current editor Kerry Myers, and glanced at the issues that were fanned across the front table. I purchased a few back issues and headed into the arena with my friends, not knowing that this unique news magazine would become not only the focus of my first long-term scholarly project but also one of the most meaningful collections of writing that I would ever read. On the ride back to Baton Rouge, I flipped through *Angolite* issues and began to consider how such a publication could be the focus of a project.

Our global and national literature is filled with accounts of writing "behind bars." A brief, international list with no regards for historical division or continuity might include Boethius, Cervantes, Thomas More, Walter Raleigh, John Donne, Richard Lovelace, John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Oscar Wilde, Maxim Gorky, Dostoyevsky, Voltaire, the Marquis de Sade, and Jean Genet. However, these men have little in common with the majority of Angola inmates aside from the fact that they were incarcerated; none are black, few were poor. To draw from our own American canon, one could turn to Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" – both of which are often anthologized in guides to argumentation and first-year writing readers. The work of Angela Davis and Malcolm X are exemplary in describing and critiquing the prison experience. Jack Henry Abbott's *In the Belly of the Beast* draws upon both his reading of existential philosophy and a keen eye for detail to show prison at its worst. There are indeed others: Iceburg Slim,

George Jackson, Assata Shakur, James Santiago Baca, Kathy Boudin, Mumia Abu-Jamal. H. Bruce Franklin has championed the writing of inmates in several works, including *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* and his important anthology *Prison Writing in 20th Century America*. However, despite Franklin's critical understanding of penal culture as well as his obvious commitment to critiquing the prison-industrial complex, he does not fully take prison journalism into account in either his scholarly account of prison writing nor his anthology of American prison poetry and prose. While my project is framed as a contribution to literacy studies, it is also an attempt to show the rich, fruitful writing that can be found in the penal press and, specifically, *The Angolite* as an important part of the corpus of confinement.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a system that is designed to control and divide has produced a canon that is sharp, exacting, and poignant. The literature of confinement shows not only the creative power of the kept, but also reminds us as contemporary readers that *we are the real keepers* in our tacit approval of a prison system that dehumanizes rather than rehabilitates, that destroys more than it heals, and that profits from those who cannot afford the same legal representation as elites.

The Angolite champions the needs of the kept. It speaks for them; if we are willing to listen, it can speak to us.

Chapter Two:
“To Live Outside the Law, You Must Be Honest”
-- Words, Walls, and the Rhetorical Practices
of *The Angolite*

On January 15, 2005, Wilbert Rideau was released after forty-four years behind bars at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.⁸ Rideau’s retrial – his fourth since 1961– rekindled the divisions over race and rehabilitation that have contextualized his case since his initial arrest for the killing of Julia Ferguson in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Rideau’s retrial also brought national attention to *The Angolite*, the award winning prison-based news magazine that he edited for over three decades. Since the early 1950s, *The Angolite* has provided journalistic and creative accounts of prison life to an audience both inside and outside the walls of the penitentiary. *Angolite* articles such as “The Deathmen,” “Conversations With the Dead,” and “Prisonomics” allow readers on both sides of the walls, bars, and concertina wire to get a glimpse of prison life. It has been featured in the *New York Times*, *All Things Considered*, *Nightline*, and other popular media venues. In 1979, *The Angolite* won both the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and the Silver Gavel Award from the American Bar Association; the following year, Rideau and co-editor Billy Wayne Sinclair⁹ won the coveted George Polk Award for Special Interest Reporting – one of the most prestigious journalism prizes next to the Pulitzer. *The Angolite* is also a seven-time finalist for the National Magazine Award.

Of course, neither Rideau – a former death row inmate -- nor any staff member of *The Angolite* was able to accept any awards in person, despite the fact that in each case, it was the first time that an inmate had won any of these accolades. Yet *Angolite* staffers continued to

⁸ Louisiana State Penitentiary is often referred to as simply “Angola” or LSP; in this dissertation, they are used interchangeably.

⁹ See *A Life in the Balance: The Billy Wayne Sinclair Story*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000.

attract attention in the public sphere despite their positioning as outsiders who lack the usual access to sites of public sphere participation such as the academy or the mainstream press.¹⁰

Rideau was also a co-producer for *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison* – a Sundance Award winning and Oscar nominated documentary -- and worked closely with directors Jonathan Stack and Liz Garbus. His article “Why Prisons Don’t Work,” featured in the March 21, 1994 issue of *Time*, helped popularize both *The Angolite* itself and the claim that he was “the most rehabilitated prisoner in America” (Colt 69).

The tangled history of Louisiana State Penitentiary is well documented in Mark Carleton’s *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System*.¹¹ In 1939, a national news story by Harnett Kane dubbed Angola “the Alcatraz of the South.” In 1951, in the wake of an inmate protest against harsh working conditions where 31 prisoners slashed their own heel tendons, *Collier’s* labeled the facility “America’s Worst Prison.” Despite improvements by various wardens and governors, especially Gov. Robert F. Kennon, the massive budget reductions throughout the 1950s and 1960s along with the high number of inmate assaults and murders led Angola to be known as “the bloodiest prison in the South.”¹² During the 1970s,

¹⁰ Nancy Frasier, in “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” (from *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed: Craig Calhoun. Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 1992. 109-42.) offers a succinct explanation of Habermas’ concept to the public sphere: “a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is a space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized area of discursive interaction” (110). Distinct from both the state and the official economy, Frasier finds that Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is “indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice” (110-11) but is not “sufficiently distinct from the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere to serve the needs of critical theory today” (111). See also Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” *Public Culture* 7(1): 3-33.

¹¹ Carleton’s account provides a narrative from the earliest days of the prison, through the violence of prisoner leasing and dramatic shifts in administrations, to its continued focus on “legitimate profit-making” (195) rather than rehabilitation. “If Louisiana’s penal history is unique in any respect,” writes Carleton, “the uniqueness may be found in the total politicalization of the system since it was initially leased in 1844” (199). For other accounts of Angola, see Anne Butler and C. Murray Henderson’s *Angola: A Half-Century of Rage and Reform* (Lafayette, LA: USL UP, 1990) and *Dying to Tell: Angola – Crime, Consequence, Conclusion at Louisiana State Penitentiary* (Lafayette, LA: USL UP, 1992).

¹² See *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge), 24 April 2005, 1H and 10H.

many inmates took to the practice of sleeping with Sears Roebuck catalogues tied to their chests to protect them from late-night knifings. In 1974, a U.S. district court judge ordered the state of Louisiana to end such violence and improve conditions for inmates. Within two years, Angola was desegregated and Rideau became the first black staff member of *The Angolite*. Already locally famous for his efforts with *The Lifer*, another prison newspaper circulated by black churches, Rideau helped turn *The Angolite* into a credible, well known publication.¹³

The history of prison journalism has been taken up by writers such as Russell Baird and, more recently, James McGrath Morris. While H. Bruce Franklin has thoroughly examined songwriters, poets, and fiction writers who took up the pen while serving time in the penitentiary in several essays as well as in *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison*, Morris notes early in his own study that the prison press has rarely been explicitly considered as part of penal history in the United States. Only Eleanor Novek has recently examined the transformative power that prison publications can have for inmates. All of these works play a role in Chapter Three which further connects literacy studies – a discipline which I hope to contribute to with this present analysis – to *The Angolite*, one of the few prison publications that have survived the essential elimination of prison publications during the past three decades, a fact that Morris laments as another step in the silencing of one of the fastest growing demographics in the United States.

Defining prison journalism might be quite simple; it is a practice where inmates in state or federal penitentiaries are allowed, usually by more progressive-thinking wardens, to

¹³ Those interested in a more detailed account of Rideau might turn to Amy Bach's "Unforgiven," a profile of Rideau published in *The Nation* (21 January 2002) as well as Michael Perlstein's "Wilbert Rideau is Freed," *The Times-Picayune* (16 January 2005, A1, A21). *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars* (New York: Times Books, 1992) is a collection of *Angolite* articles that features some of Rideau's writing and is quite useful in getting a sense of the magazine's collective work.

investigate and report on stories that are meaningful to inmate readers. Some prison newspapers also venture into literary territory and publish poetry or short fiction contributed by inmates. Pen-and-ink drawings and photography, depending on budget constraints (and Morris' history of the penal press continually notes the shoestring funding for such publications), are also an important feature. As Morris notes, the vast majority of prison news publications were written by male inmates, although Novek's study investigates a group of women incarcerated in a prison in the northeast who are in the beginning stages of building their own prison news publication. Like a small town newspaper, prison journalism articles might cover topics that are of specific interest to the inmates held within a particular institution, such as an intramural football game or an upcoming prison event. Profiles of inmates who earn a certain degree of success – perhaps an inmate-tutor or a founder of a self-help group – are also fairly common. However, publications such as *The Angolite* (especially after 1975) are also known for coverage of issues that seem much weightier than what's on the menu at the mess hall. As we will see in Chapters Four and Five, topics such as struggles for educational opportunities or the secret world of sex behind bars have, at times, taken center stage.

Occasionally, as in the case of *Prison Legal News* or, for our purposes here, *The Angolite*, prison newspaper staffs can find a readership that is outside their own respective prisons. Not only did prison publications often reprint each other's articles and create a virtual network that connected inmate publications (an interesting practice, in that penitentiaries are designed to remove inmates from contact with anyone outside of their own prison), but readers in the "free world" (a term I heard often from inmates in my time as a field researcher) also can become aware of such newspapers. And there lies part of the trap that often awaits prison publications, dubbed "the devil's bargain" by Novek; offering inmates a chance to discuss prison issues opens

the door – or the cell, in this case – for critiques of prison policy both at the local and national level. The prison press relies on the benevolence of the warden, who acts as a sort of publisher. In a space devoid of freedom, prison journalists have to deal with a wide array of restrictions – what to say, how to say it. As noted by Rideau, “I have never understood the thing about administrators being afraid of the prison publication. They are the ones who choose to run it” (Morris 11). So while defining prison journalism is fairly easy, the practices of the writers involved in the penal press are incredibly complex.

This set of power relations between keeper and kept – for our purposes here, between inmate journalists and their warden publishers – recalls Michel Foucault’s examination of the panopticonic gaze of the prison and the production of docile bodies as well as Ervin Goffman’s discussion of the totalizing nature of institutions. For Foucault, complete surveillance is one of the key instruments of penal power; via the use of time tables and other methods, the inmate’s body is completely controlled and organized. Such practices are not limited to the prison but rather extend to all aspects of modern life in such places as schools. Resistance to control, as both Foucault and Goffman argue, is incredibly limited; the wardens hold all the cards. However, the work of the generations of *Angolite* writers, including the current staff, is a highly politicized literacy practice that, in small but meaningful ways, works against what might be called “institutionalization.” As Rideau argued in an interview, “Prison is a place where everything is an assault on your self-esteem. The daily routine will kill any need to make decisions. You can become like an old knife that has grown rusty” (Morris 18). Writing and researching and collaborative editing provides a small but important shield against the numbing production of Foucault’s docile bodies.

The Angolite's success (as measured by Rideau in terms of mental and spiritual survival or by scholars such as Morris who emphasize the publication's longevity and influence) is fairly miraculous considering that prisons, in the words of activist and scholar Angela Davis, are an absent-presence, "a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited" (16).¹⁴ Prisons, especially in the American South, are placed elsewhere, far away from our daily consciousness. Furthermore, Americans rarely think of inmates (aside from the rare exceptions) as highly literate, rational beings. As noted by literacy theorist and prison ethnographer Anita Wilson, "There is almost a universal theory that illiteracy and criminality are synonymous. National literacy surveys around the world inevitably focus on the lack of literacy ability among the world's prisoners, and statistics are frequently linked to educational shortcomings" ("Speak Up..." 95). These dominant conceptions of inmates situate *The Angolite* as a legitimate and politically important text to explore in relation to the current discussion of literacy.

Literacy scholars have often analyzed the reading and writing practices of communities that are outside the mainstream; Heath's *Ways With Words* and Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and The Tools*, for example, are both detailed examinations of how marginalized communities use reading and writing in their daily lives. Such work is meant to both challenge stereotypes and to contribute to curriculum development. Deborah Brandt, while certainly a progressive literacy theorist, has argued about the limits of studying such situated literacy events, and other recent scholars have critiqued the concept of literacy as liberation – a concept popularized by Paulo Freire and, in our own country, Jonathon Kozol. One might ask if literacy ability can indeed enable marginalized communities, considering the strong economic boundaries that

¹⁴ For a related discussion in the field of composition research, see Prendergast. Prendergast argues that the subject of race is typically ignored in its relationship to the composing process and analyzes two African-American critical race theorists whose writings deliberately avoid easy generic categories as a way to highlight race in composition scholarship.

perpetuate the status quo. This discussion, which I will elaborate on in Chapter Three, was part of the catalyst of my study of *The Angolite* – a group of writers who are physically and ideologically separated from society with little to no hope of release from a place defined by violence, uniquely unequal power relations, and low reading and writing abilities. How might *The Angolite* function as a small but important act of resistance against a discourse that positions inmates as unredeemable waste? How might an analysis of *The Angolite* in its historical and contemporary context contribute to the current debate over literacy as potentially transformative?

The aim of this chapter is to both introduce *The Angolite* to the scholarly community and to briefly analyze the rhetorical strategies that are typically featured in current issues. While I realize that most dissertations begin with a review of pertinent scholarship, I believe that it is best to offer some examples of *Angolite* writing and introduce my analysis before situating my study within the larger field of Literacy Studies in Chapter Three; while *The Angolite* is fairly well known, mainstream media discussions of this publication rarely, if ever, offer examples of any of the writing that is found within the pages of *The Angolite*. In this chapter, I argue that *Angolite* staff members attempt to re-shape commonly held assumptions of the prisoner, to grow beyond a marginalized status, to become something other than *other*; such a text is, indeed, an act of resistance, even despite Foucault's claim that criticism of the prison institution has limited effects. *The Angolite* exists and has always existed in what Wilson (drawing upon postcolonial theory) calls a "third space" – a position between the institution of the prison and the various literacies of the "free world":

In order to 'win the battle' [against becoming "prisonized" or "institutionalized"] people in prison construct a space between inside and outside worlds where they can 'occupy their minds' while living out their everyday prison lives. Bounded by a consensual experience – in this case the experience of prison – such a space can accommodate a whole community with a membership

that can include both central and peripheral players, prisoners and staff, and those who live both inside and outside the prison walls. (“Four Days” 74)

In a similar manner, Adela C. Licona, drawing on the mestiza consciousness work (“which refuses fixed dichotomous structures and their implications for matters of (self) representation” (104)) of Gloria Anzaldua, sees third space as “a location and/or practice” (105). “As a location,” Licona argues, “third space has the potential to be a space of shared understanding and meaning-making” (105). Rideau himself has argued that *The Angolite* office is one of the few “neutral spaces” within LSP – a space where writers work to construct a fair, honest account of the world of Angola and the larger discourse of the penitentiary (Morris 160). While the actual “neutrality” of *The Angolite* as site and publication is a complicated issue (which will be discussed later in this chapter), this “third-space” allows for the long standing connection between *Angolite* writers and both their inmate and non-inmate audiences; by drawing on genres and modes that are recognizable to non-inmate readers, and by presenting themselves in a tone that reflects both candor and credibility, *Angolite* writers create a third-space that reaches out to both inmates and “freemen.”¹⁵

The various staff members of *The Angolite* collectively attempt to compose a counter-identity against the American conception of the prisoner, a conception that has been masterfully traced by John M. Sloop in *The Cultural Prison: Discourse, Prisoners, and Punishment*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carolyn Miller argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (Freedman and Midway, 24). Genres can legitimate certain concerns. For example, newspaper articles are expected to report on events and provide documentation for their factual basis; *The Angolite*, as a news publication, implies a different set of goals and reader expectations than an exclusively literary magazine.

¹⁶ Sloop provides a comprehensive account of one set of discourses – “all articles from popular journals under the heading of prisoners (or relevant subheadings) in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* from 1950 to 1993” (7). He notes that “Studying the articulations that surround a term like prisoner aids us in understanding the cultural definitions of institutional discipline, the ‘discipline’ of discipline” (13). Sloop’s work extends Foucault’s genealogical practice to our own time and place; in short, he attempts to describe not only how we as a culture have

Rather than focusing on individual prisoners, reform policies, or even punishment itself, Sloop's study is centered on how prisoners and punishment have been represented in mainstream American media during the past half-century. While Americans' notions of prisoners have changed over the course of one hundred years in varying, complex ways, and while the popular representation of female inmates over the past fifty years is relatively stable – “positioned along the lines of the gendered roles of motherhood and protector of cultural morality” (126) representations of male inmates during the past thirty years have become radically violent and Africanized. The question of inmate representation is also articulated in a variety of monographs, such as Elliott Currie's *Crime and Punishment in America*: “[t]he prison has become a looming presence in our society to an extent unparalleled in our history or that of any other industrial democracy. Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented governmental social program of our time” (21). Perhaps the most popular account of prison culture and Louisiana prison life specifically is Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*; part memoir, part analysis, she attempts to show death row inmates as human and worthy of forgiveness despite the heinous nature of their crimes.

As prisoners, they are outsiders, physically positioned at a penal farm 65 miles from the state capitol of Baton Rouge and surrounded on three sides by the murky tributaries of the Mississippi River. Ideologically, they are positioned in an era of “just desserts” penology where

“seen” prisoners within particular historical/cultural moments, but also how such representations are indeed a part of punishment itself. “We cannot understand the enacted meaning of the term prisoners,” Sloop writes, “by looking only at what philosophers or sociologists of crime and punishment mean by it unless such philosophers and sociologists have taken their discourse into the public forum and made claims in the ideological struggle over its meaning” (6).

inmates are essentially responsible for their own rehabilitation.¹⁷ As writers, they attempt – and, as noted by the letters to *The Angolite* from “free” readers, are somewhat successful – to offer an alternative to the unredeemable convict. Tommy Tarr, a former assistant editor in the late 1960s, offers a succinct articulation of what *The Angolite* means for both its writers and readers:

[*The Angolite*] is the voice of the convict far removed from the centers of influence. It is dedicated to the men it represents, and the women too, though they are some distance from us in point of space. Though such a journal has a limited sphere of influence, it reaches those whose words are heeded, and if it can ever, at any time engage or ally one man, it has done a great deal. There are few people aware of or concerned with the state of corrections...When an editorial staff puts together a magazine, it does so in the hope that someone will realize...that convicts are real people, just like the guy next door...The truth about prison is an untold story – we doubt it can be told. But every member of the Penal Press, who is allowed to, makes an effort at telling that story. (June 1971: 3, 12)

As of this writing, *The Angolite* has only been briefly discussed in a scholarly context by James McGrath Morris in a chapter in *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars*. I am indebted to Morris’ foundational historical study of the penal press and his chapter on *The Angolite* in particular; what I will add here is yet another context, that of current studies of literacy. As outsiders, *Angolite* staff writers appropriate rhetorical strategies that are common in mainstream texts and discussions in order to position their own resistance and to provide a counter-identity that challenges contemporary notions of prisoners and prison culture. While inmates are stripped of political privileges such as the right to vote, and while they live under the complete domination of prison regulation and observation, inmate journalists can perform small acts of resistance that challenge how they are represented in the public media and, at times, strive for changes in the conditions that shape their daily lives. For these writers, literacy is a socio-

¹⁷ See Sloop, chapter 6: “a popular philosophy that holds that criminals should be given only their due, nothing more and nothing less. That is, every criminal activity is posited as enacting a specific measure of punishment...Other considerations, such as rehabilitation or training, cannot be required but may be offered on a voluntary basis” (133).

political practice (Freire; Street; Barton and Hamilton) that allows them to make a meaningful connection with other inmates as well as readers outside the boundaries of the penitentiary. Although literacy has more recently been discussed as hardly the liberatory force that teachers of writing might wish it were and that literacy is used by dominant economic forces to maintain social inequities (a topic that I take up in Chapter Three), *Angolite* writers press onward to write and disseminate their own accounts despite the representations that shape the general public's views of incarcerated felons as unworthy of redemption. A literacy project like *The Angolite* can help literacy scholars re-think notions of transformation and liberation. This is why my methodology and theoretical frame include literacy theory and discourse analysis.

For the purposes of this chapter, I have mainly limited my sources to only the issues published during 2003, allowing for a close look at the actual writing within each issue. I chose to focus on these more recent issues for several reasons. First, 2003 was the beginnings of the post-Rideau *Angolite*; while Rideau is one of the key figures in the history of the publication (and I address some of his writings in Chapters Three and Four), I want to show how the work of *The Angolite* extends beyond one single figure. This choice allows us to understand *The Angolite* as a long-standing, continuous community of writer/activists rather than just the fruits of one inmate's labors. I also draw upon these recent writings because of my field work at LSP; over the course of several months, as I stated in my introduction, I was able to develop a relationship with these writers, especially Myers and Hillburn, that gave me a keen sense of the importance of *The Angolite* within the world of Angola. I was able to observe discussions of upcoming articles and editorial concerns, accompany writers while they covered a story related to the Angola Rodeo, and discuss with them how their contribution to this publication affected their lives. I narrate some key scenes from my time at LSP in the interchapters that come

between the four main chapters in this study to help readers get a sense of my own experiences as a field researcher and to provide a portrait of this institution.

In 2003, *The Angolite* published a series of combined issues to make up for gaps in publication during the previous year. At the time, the staff included Kerry Myers, Lane Nelson, Douglas Dennis, Clarence Goodlow, Jeffery Hillburn, and Ronald Walker. Other inmates as well as “free” writers from outside LSP also contributed occasional articles and creative works. Such contributions further the collaborative nature of this publication; in a sense, *The Angolite* functions as a space where staff members, LSP officials, “free” writers and readers, and inmates from both LSP and other institutions come together through the act of writing to re-negotiate what it means to be an inmate in a maximum security penitentiary.

As discussed in Kendall R. Phillips’ “Spaces of Invention: Dissent, Freedom, and Thought in Foucault,” resistance and political engagement through writing might seem improbable considering the complex nature of power in Foucault’s model of discourse. Phillips’ thorough exploration of rhetoric and Foucault locates a space for invention and even resistance to the totalizing power of discourse and the seeming implausibility for a free agent participating in emancipatory politics. In this manner, *The Angolite* – as a body of writing by inmates, a group of marginalized rhetors, a physical space within a historically troubled institution – is an impressive rhetorical act in both its longevity as a publication and the power of its prose. Despite its physical and ideological marginalization, *The Angolite* works as a site of resistance by maintaining an ethos of responsible journalism and by using genres and methods that valued by both the inmates at LSP and mainstream, “free” audiences. It recognizes the complex nature of power that marks their hours as writers and inmates, yet it continues to enact contemplation and social change from the unlikeliest of locations.

“Now I stand here lookin’...” – Photographs and Covers

While quite different from those mimeographed, typewritten pages of the early years and even up through the 1970’s, the current issues of *The Angolite* maintain many of the generic features that have always been part of its structure. All issues begin with a striking photograph or pen-and-ink drawing on the cover: a lone inmate mops down “The Walk,” a long concrete sidewalk that connects the main building to cellblocks and dorms; an exaggerated skull draped by the state flag of Texas and surrounded by headlines from Texas newspapers (“Karla Faye Tucker dies by lethal injection; first woman to be executed in U.S. in 15 years”; “Texas kills 33rd inmate this year; accounts for nearly half of all executions in U.S.”); a stark, black and white photograph of Point Lookout, the prison cemetery. The cover from May/June 2003 portrays inmate Eugene Tanniehill at work as a preacher – offset in the photo by hand drawn and photographic clips of shackles, nails, and the old “white stripe” uniforms of the penal farm; the July/August/September issue announces the new education center at Angola, underscored by a passage from Judge Henry A. Politz: “Every person deserves to be treated fairly, with respect...There ought to be no short cuts with people’s rights.”

Such covers are worthy of their own longer discussion, yet it is the photographs, pictures, and covers that often draw readers into the world of both Angola and *The Angolite*. Each cover is the work of either a staff member or a contributor from within the prison system – usually LSP; the articles that accompany these images provide evidence for how inmates understand the context of the prison. The difficulty of interpreting photographs that center on incarceration and punishment has been taken up in several critical texts. Diana George and Diane Shoos, for example, explore the complicated nature of lynching photographs and how they seem to articulate a mere historical event and not a site for continued inquiry; the reader/viewer is placed

in a tangled position between witness and voyeur, and George and Shoos conclude by noting how both positions have a role in “eclipsing” the political aspects of such photographs. Michael Bernard-Donals argues, in a similar manner, how photographs of Holocaust victims work to treat such horrific events “as if readers already understand them and so there is little need to interrogate their meaning or their place in contemporary politics” (George and Shoos 607). In short, both studies show how the historical photograph might work as “a shared forgetting” (George and Shoos 588, originally in Bernard-Donals 381-82), as a way for viewers to further distance themselves from the horrors of historical events such as lynching or punishment. The photograph implies that the event represented is a historical past, not a continued present. Granted, photographs of lynchings and photographs of incarceration are not synonymous. However, many of the scholars whose work informs Chapter Five of this study argue that our current national prison situation – where black males are by far the largest represented demographic – has its roots in lynchings and in the perpetual surveillance of blacks since they were brought to these shores in chains.

Angolite staff members are clearly aware of the rhetorical power of such images; photographs of inmates by inmates and published within an inmate magazine that calls attention to their collective position as outsiders are a strong representational force and work as an incentive for readers to peruse pages and vicariously “enter” the gates of Angola Prison. Consequently, *Angolite* photographs have been the impetus for other published writings, such as Jane Officer’s *If I Should Die: A Death Row Correspondence*. Officer, who corresponded with death row inmate Andrew Lee Jones, presents her letters along with *Angolite* photographs of the electrocuted body of Robert Wayne Williams; the brutal photos show the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th degree burns on Williams’ face and head and were used to argue against the use of the electric

chair as a means of execution for failing to meet evolving standards of decency. In one of the letters, Williams states that “These people here...they want us dead and forgotten...they are trying to break our spirit but I won’t let them break mine...We are lost to the outside world...The way it seem, they are just going to take us completely off the map” (98). Clearly, the purpose of *The Angolite* and specifically the photographs contained within is to combat such erasure.

As part of the back cover, each *Angolite* issue carries a subscription form for outside readers, framed by the masthead: “Curious...about the world beyond bars?” This question reverberates with the difficult viewer status as voyeur or witness, and such a position is further complicated with the printed claim that *The Angolite* has “the freedom to publish whatever it desired, subject to the same standards governing professional journalism.” Proclaiming that *The Angolite* is “America’s boldest experiment in journalism and freedom of expression in the world behind bars,” the advertisement is scaffolded by praise from such acclaimed writers as Peter Jennings (“considered the best prison journalism in the country”) and Elmore Leonard (“fascinating samples of prison life...The real stuff.”) Such claims, along with similar passages from *The New York Times*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and other publications, work to show that the writings contained within *The Angolite* are seen as worthy and laudable by mainstream, “insider” institutions.

While the center photograph in the subscription advertisement in the case of four of the five 2003 issues – a group of inmates working on the penal farm in the blistering Louisiana sun while an armed guard on horseback, positioned in the foreground, looks on – reminds us that these men are certainly outsiders who lack access to traditional forms of rhetorical, physical, and social participation, the complete layout of the advertisement is a deliberately deployed strategy

to show that *The Angolite* is indeed, as Leonard notes, “the real stuff” and a force that can spur action and even reform.

“Now I been in jail when all my mail showed...”
-- *Angolite* Editorials

During the years of Rideau’s editorship, each *Angolite* issue began with an editorial entitled “Getting it Together.” Such a phrase seems fitting considering both the purposes of *The Angolite* as well as the themes of rebirth, self-reliance, and rehabilitation that are hallmarks of prison writings:

Redemption, second chances, change – it’s a thread woven into the fabric of our society. If there is no such thing as change or redemption, then we might as well fire all the preachers, counselors, social workers...If redemption isn’t possible, then we are lost to perdition, we are lost. (Jan/Feb 2003, 1)

In 2003, editor Kerry Myers changed the name of his editorial column to “Wire to Wire,” and the above passage is from his first installment under this new title; drawings of barbed wire and a guard tower again cue readers to the outsider position of *The Angolite* staff. The Jan/Feb issue specifically assured readers on both sides of the wire that “Wilbert Rideau’s legacy with *The Angolite* is assured” and that the column will “continue to provoke thought, encourage dialogue, and stir the conscience” of *The Angolite* audience. Myers’ editorials highlight key features of each respective issue, introduce readers to new staff members, and offer opinions on topics that are central to the larger conversation about prison culture.

In five editorials in 2003, Myers discusses such topics as the removal of college courses and Pell Grants for inmates, the rapidly aging prison population in Louisiana, the failures and successes of inmates who have left Angola, and the range of legislation passed in 2003 that affect prison life such as reforms for juvenile justice and the execution of the mentally retarded. Yet in each of these editorials, Myers – like his predecessor Rideau – attempts to show that, in

his words, “There is no such thing as a *typical* prisoner. Each is an individual whose path and circumstances are unique” (May/June 1, 2, italics mine). Myers’ claim in the

July/August/September editorial also offers a similar appeal:

No, Angola is not some warped fusion of television and Hollywood – Oz, Shawshank Redemption, Cool Hand Luke, or an old gangster film. As titillating as it sounds, sweaty, muscle bound, tattooed and hygienically challenged monsters rattling bars and howling sexual insults...waiting to pounce at the first opportunity, do not populate this prison. (1,2)

While Myers notes that prison is “a societal necessity,” (1) – a claim that runs counter to the work of such activists as Angela Davis who call for the complete abolition of the prison as an international institution – his writing in each editorial attempts to articulate that prisoners can indeed be ethical, literate, intelligent, and worthy of attention; lives can indeed change. Instead of an unfocused rant, the editorial introduces an organized collection of writings centered on inmate issues. Myers’ voice would be right at home with any editorial column in a major newspaper. Such a practice – a practice that is recognizable by most readers as an established genre in journalism and as a dialogical act, inviting responses via reader mail – continues the traditions established by previous *Angolite* editors. Myers represents himself as the ethical editor, providing a balanced, reasonable account of events and concerns.

“You forgot to leave me with the key” –
“Inside Angola” and Other Columns

Like most news publications, *The Angolite* features several regularly appearing segments that focus on specific issues. Such divisions help give a sense of organization and continuity to *The Angolite* as a whole. Again, considering Sloop’s assessment of contemporary representations of American prisoners, one might expect *The Angolite* to merely be an all out assault with no sense of rhetorical balance or restraint. Instead, the sub-sections – such as “Inside Angola,” “Religion

in Prison,” “Legal Spectrum,” “Straight Talk,” “News Briefs,” “Sports Front,” and “Club News” – offer cues as to how *The Angolite* functions for both inmate and non-inmate readers. Such divisions employ recognizable journalistic genres: they report events, explain issues, profile figures of interest, summarize data, and narrate stories. In short, the overall organization of these regularly appearing columns implies to readers that these inmates are fully conscious of their role as journalists despite their marginalized position as inmates in one of the most historically troubled prisons in the United States.

While “Inside Angola” initially appears to be written specifically for inmate readers, this column often offers cues for non-inmate audiences and even readers who aren’t so familiar with *The Angolite* or the troubled history of Angola. In the January/February issue, “Doing Their Part” begins with a brief description that is clearly unnecessary for Angola inmates; such a move, however slight, shows how *Angolite* writers are aware of their position and how they wish to include rather than exclude readers from both sides of the wire:

Isolated in the northwestern corner of West Feliciana Parish, 20 miles from the nearest town and surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River, the deep ravines of the Tunica Hills on the fourth, Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola is considered the middle of nowhere. Though the prison is isolated, its more than 1,800 employees are not. (10)

“Inside Angola” covers a number of topics, such as graduation ceremonies from technical education programs, deaths of inmates, outsider visits to LSP, and updates on inmate programs. One segment, also from the January/February issue, discusses the results of DNA testing which led to the release of an inmate who had already served 16 years behind bars. Another reports how the “Red Hat Cellblock” – “a concrete block of 30 five-by-seven foot cells with solid steel doors, no heat, [and] a 12-inch square barred, windowless and screenless hole...in each cell for ventilation” with only “a concrete slab...as a bed, and a hole in the floor for a toilet”

(March/April, 11) and used to break the most incorrigible of inmates from 1934 until 1973 – is now designated as a historical landmark and listed in the National Registry of Historic Places. As a legacy to the cruel history of Angola – at times, each tiny cell held 5 to 6 men and was sometimes used as a holding cell for inmates bound for death row – current Warden Burl Cain argued that it was necessary to save the building “so we don’t go back there” (11).

The article “Doing Their Part,” quoted above, focuses on a call-up of reservists and National Guard members in late 2002 and how Angola employees and their families – as well as Angola inmates – were affected. *Angolite* staffers interviewed prison employees who either had children deployed for the Persian Gulf or were called up themselves, focusing on the “anxiety of those left behind” (10). This article also notes that many Angola inmates have sons and daughters in active duty or in the National Guard or reserves. What is crucial here is that the article closes by noting that because of this event, “prisoners and employees, who work and live together, will have one less thing that separates them” (11). While not all “Inside Angola” articles explicitly try to establish a connection between staff and inmates – or, furthermore, inmates and “freemen” – such tactics that attempt to challenge audience conceptions of prisoners and of what constitutes the Angola community are quite common, as seen in another “Inside Angola” article from that same issue called “Angola Blues”:

Warden Burl Cain says nine out of ten Angola prisoners will die here. Given that, and the yearly reduction of numbers of Angolans being released, one would expect this maximum security prison, packed to the gills with killers, rapists, and armed robbers, to be a maelstrom of desperation and violence...In truth, Angola is safer than a typical shopping mall. This is no accident; it is Cain’s plan (13).

This example brings up the question of *Angolite* representations of authority figures such as wardens, guards, and other LSP employees. In 1974, Warden C. Paul Phelps publicly stated that

The Angolite was free to publish whatever it wanted, as long as the news-magazine was held to the same standards as any other news publication; *The Angolite* would be “a credible vehicle of information in a place traditionally ruled by rumor” (Morris 160). Such a statement pushed the publication into the public sphere and eventually led to Rideau’s popularity as a writer. All wardens since Phelps, including Cain, have held to this position.

While in-house murder rates are certainly quite low under Cain’s administration, and while his championing of what he calls “moral rehabilitation” is popular with religious groups that volunteer at LSP, Cain has not always been shown in a favorable light by the popular press. As noted by *Christianity Today* writer Chris Frink, Louisiana Senator Don Cravins (who chaired a Senate committee overseeing prisons) was unimpressed with the Cain-era Angola and noted that Cain and his staff “do what they want...There is no accountability” (Frink). Warden Cain was also accused of bribery by *God of the Rodeo: the Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second Ride in Louisiana’s Angola Prison* author Daniel Bergner, who argued that Cain tried to “wrest editorial control of the book and charge him \$50,000 for continued access to the prison” (Frink). While Cain denied the allegations, the Department of Corrections settled out of court. Cain has also been held in contempt by a federal judge in a lawsuit filed by an inmate “who claimed he was punished for blowing the whistle on the prison’s canned-food re-labeling business, run with inmate labor” (Frink). Furthermore, a 1998 Senate committee chaired by Senator Cravins accused Cain of “allowing a businessman to keep horses at the prison and of squelching...*The Angolite*” (Frink). Although Cain admitted to the first charge, he denied any attempt at censorship.¹⁸

¹⁸ It seems interesting that this critique was published in a *Christianity Today* article, in light of Warden Cain’s explicit use of religious rhetoric in his public statements. See also Bergner’s account in *God of the Rodeo*.

While Warden Cain has become quite the public figure, considering his role in the Angola Prison Rodeo (see below) and his participation in documentaries such as *The Farm* as well as his recent command of a temporary prison in New Orleans during the months after Hurricane Katrina, it is difficult to determine the exact level of influence that wardens and staff members play in the daily life of *The Angolite*. Novek's study of women inmate journalists discusses how articles that directly challenged the decisions of their warden or even offered minor complaints about such things as food quality in their mess hall were censored. Participants in her study learned to carefully choose what topics they would broach. As noted by photographer Deborah Luster, whose *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* captures the images of several Angola inmates, wardens "are only going to let you see what they want you to see" (53). Luster's claim seems quite similar to a comment Rideau made in a recent speech at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University: "Let's face it – if you want to continue publishing you can't alienate the authority."

Still, one could easily argue that Warden Cain is a vast improvement from Angola wardens of the past and that LSP is certainly a better place it was during the first half of the 20th century. For example, educational opportunities for inmates at LSP have drastically increased despite the loss of federal grants for college courses for inmates, as noted in several *Angolite* articles as well as accounts within popular Louisiana newspapers. In another "Inside Angola" article, Cain is praised for his participation in a prison cemetery program; Point Lookout, a cemetery for inmates whose families cannot afford to bury their inmate-relatives, is supported by two inmate self-help organizations. The project "replaced a 'get it over and done with' approach...with a group of volunteers who gave dignity to the occasion by providing a small interment service at the gravesite" (March/April 2003, 15). Cain is quoted in the article as

wanting “dignified burials that family members...would find appropriate” (15). “When a prisoner dies,” Cain states, “his sentence is over...He’s served his time” (15). Such a practice plays a strong role in the lives of the inmates at LSP: “It makes a difference, not only to [family members] but to us,” states project coordinator Checo Yancy; “It helps us deal with what, eventually, will be all our fates” (15).

Such programs, as reported in “Inside Angola” and “On the Farm,” another short inmate written column that appears near the end of every *Angolite*, reflect well on both the prison administration and the inmates themselves; Cain and other Angola staff members are frequently represented in *The Angolite* as integral participants in LSP events. Furthermore, the mere notion that *The Angolite* still exists while dozens of prison publications have folded speaks volumes about Warden Cain and his staff.¹⁹ In fact, Warden Cain made several public statements before the release of Wilbert Rideau supporting his rehabilitation and his abilities as a journalist. While academic writers and prison activists might wish to portray all Southern prison wardens as similar to figures in popular films such as *Cool Hand Luke*, the representation of power figures within prison publications is a complicated issue.

Instead, the matter at hand is how *Angolite* writers show what occurs “Inside Angola,” and such articles as “Doing Their Part” reflect a keen sense of the delicate situation between inmate journalists and prison authority figures. In several instances, *Angolite* writers accentuate positive changes made by wardens throughout its history as a publication. While *The Angolite* does not exist to merely represent Louisiana State Penitentiary as “safe,” the tactics in the above examples reflect how these outsiders deliberately use rhetoric to gain a sense of access to mainstream discussions of prisons and to represent themselves as responsible, ethical journalists.

¹⁹ See Morris, Chapter 19.

While we, as readers, might not ever physically see “Inside Angola,” *Angolite* writers position themselves as honest, trustworthy, and able to give us a glimpse of life behind bars.

Two other regularly occurring *Angolite* columns – “Sports News” and “Club News” – also attempt to give readers a sense of the day-to-day activities of life at LSP. Programs such as organized football and basketball as well as inmate organizations such as the Human Relations Club, Veterans Incarcerated, the Angola Special Civic Project, and the Angola Lifers Association are incredibly important to the lives of LSP inmates; such programs allow inmates to take leadership positions and to succeed in ways that are antithetical to the popular national conception of long-term inmates. While this coverage might be more important to *The Angolite*’s inmate audience, stories that discuss football championships, fund-raising efforts, educational opportunities, and other inmate club and sports team related activities are a prime component in the rhetorical positioning of *The Angolite* as a publication read by both freemen and prisoners alike; as readers, we are shown men taking part in activities that are normally considered character building and philanthropic, as opposed to the aforementioned “maelstrom of desperation and violence” that we might associate with such a place as Angola.

“I can take him to your house but I can’t unlock it”--
Angolite Feature Articles

Generally, each issue of *The Angolite* includes two to four longer articles – anywhere from nine to fifteen pages – that take a close look at a single concern. While the earliest *Angolite* issues touched on several of the concepts discussed in these articles, such as sex in prison or legal developments or Angola-centered events, the issues published under Rideau’s leadership brought such concerns to center stage and gave room for these topics to be developed at length. Morris argues that at the time, *The Angolite* became “the single most influential inmate force within the Louisiana prison system” (163), although Rideau repeatedly noted that the *Angolite*

staff cannot be seen as “power brokers in the traditional sense...What we have is the ability to influence people” (163).

Still, it is easy to see how *Angolite* writers have used their rhetorical strategies to enact change despite their marginalized position as inmates within the prison system. For example, a Rideau article about long-term inmates highlighted the case of Frank Moore – an inmate who had served thirty-three years and had been overlooked for parole-hearing opportunities by prison officials and state-level bureaucrats. The publicity generated by the article led the Louisiana Board of Pardons to review his case and to eventually release him. Such influence is unheard of within the history of the penal press. Former Warden C. Paul Phelps once stated that it would be almost impossible to “describe this scene to any correctional officer in the nation. They would never understand it, much less relate to it” (Morris 166, originally *Angolite* May/June 1980, 62).

While Phelps hoped that *The Angolite* – and perhaps, specifically, the insightful nature of the feature articles that brought to light both the brutal history of Angola and the difficulties of current, day-to-day prison life for both inmates and staff members – would act “as a vehicle of communication between the inmates and the administration” (Morris 160), it should be clear by this point that *The Angolite* also works as a medium for discussion and even identity reformation between *Angolite* writers and non-inmate readers. The current staff of *The Angolite* continues the tradition established during the Rideau era of covering topics that are central to the conversation about prisoners and punishment. For example, Lane Nelson’s “Death Watch” articles are an excellent introduction to the lengthy, tangled history of the death penalty in the United States, and many of these articles have been collected in *Death Watch: A Death Penalty Anthology*. An eight year veteran of Death Row, his work discusses how capitol cases often differ within the same legal process, the problems in providing competent legal counsel for

capitol cases, the selective application of the death penalty in light of racial and gender differences, and reflections of death row inmates.

During 2003, *The Angolite* featured lengthy articles that covered a wide range of prisoner-related issues: the difficult history of the Louisiana Criminal Code; the landmark commutation of 171 death row inmates by former Illinois governor George Ryan; the case of Herbert Welcome, a mentally retarded Angola inmate, in light of the effects of *Atkins vs. Virginia*; the gritty history of Texas' stance on executions; the legislative overhaul of juvenile justice policies in Louisiana. *Angolite* feature articles in 2003 have also centered on issues, events, and figures that are specific to Angola: a report on a visit by former heavyweight boxing champion George Forman; a discussion of armed robbers held at Angola prison (and how Louisiana is "in overkill mode with its sentencing," [Oct/Nov/Dec, 34] citing how one inmate is serving ninety-nine years for robbing \$35 from a snowcone stand); an account of Longtermers' Day, a gathering of inmates who have served time for over 25 years. Such articles, like Myers' editorials and the photographs included in each issue, are meant to give readers a sense of life inside Angola prison and to challenge popular perceptions of inmates and sentencing policy.

Granted, some *Angolite* representations of Angola events might seem rather confusing or even apologetic. Every Sunday in October, thousands of visitors pay to witness the Angola Prison Rodeo, with events such as bull riding, bareback riding, and bulldogging. However, rodeo participants are Angola inmates; while some are seasoned cowboys who work the livestock held on Angola Farm, many "had never seen livestock of any kind until they entered the Angola arena" (Oct/Dec, 26). The first rodeo was held in 1965, and by 1967 the event was opened to the general public. Currently, the rodeo takes place in an 8,000 seat arena that is almost always sold out weeks before rodeo season. Inmate participation is voluntary, but such

rodeo events as Convict Poker – a “chicken game” where inmates attempt to remain seated at a poker table while surrounded by agitated bulls – and “Guts and Glory” – in which participants attempt to grab a chip from between the horns of a charging bull – are hardly the stuff of typical rodeos and, to some, seem to merely perpetuate a theatre of violence veiled as a tourist spectacle. Melissa Schrift, in her ethnographic- based discussion of the Angola Rodeo and “institutional tourism,” offers the following critique:

The presentation of inept cowboys is bound with the promise of injury and violence. When asked why the rodeo is such a popular tourist destination, inmates do not hesitate to acknowledge the warped appeal of their inexperience. A small group of inmates laugh self-consciously as an inmate bluntly describes the appeal of the rodeo: “They here to see somebody get stomped. They here to see us get hurt.” (339-40)

Considering the power dynamic between inmates and prison officials, it is impossible to imagine such a critique published in the pages of *The Angolite* – even in light of the magazine’s history of cutting edge journalism. *Angolite* rodeo articles provide a narrative account of events, a list of winners for both rodeo and hobby craft events, profiles of select participants, and allusions to the positive implications that the rodeo has for inmates, as stated in the Oct/Nov/Dec issue:

Rodeo [concession] sales help Angola’s 32 inmate self-help and religious organizations to provide social, rehabilitation, and education programs for the inmate population. Programs such as CPR training, the Point Lookout Project...the Angola Hospice program, and other services provided...by inmate organizations could not exist to the extent they do without rodeo revenue. With corrections funding getting tighter and tighter, even the prison fire department and other groups have come to depend on rodeo concession monies to purchase much needed equipment. (24)

Angolite articles that cover the rodeo also help publicize the hobby-craft show that is part of every rodeo; inmates spend all year creating woodwork, paintings, pottery, jewelry, clothing,

and other items as “a creative outlet to kill boredom” (24) and to feel useful. The sale of their wares allows inmates to re-invest in their own work, and many participate “for no other reason than the opportunity to interact with the public and, for those few hours, to once again feel like human beings” (24). Like rodeo participants, hobby crafts are judged in a contest that also allows inmates a sense of fulfillment, and such awards are published in *The Angolite*. At times, *Angolite* articles echo Warden Cain’s comments about the rodeo and rehabilitation:

The ones who change their lives and try and rehabilitate themselves are the ones you see out here. And we must give the opportunity for change...The inmates know that if they were to act up and mess up and cause something to happen...then I wouldn’t have the rodeo...There’s tremendous peer pressure to bring out the best in everyone...It’s a safe prison. (336)

Again, this is not to say that *The Angolite* functions only as an argument in support of any warden’s particular policies or to merely show the best sides of Louisiana’s only maximum security prison. But *Angolite* articles often use stories of transformation to argue for changes in prison policy. Obviously, in the case of the rodeo articles, the fact that inmate rehabilitative activities are mainly supported by rodeo concession sales offers an implicit argument for funding needs. Even a typical profile-article can function as an implicit critique of the prison system. Such is the case with Nelson’s discussion of Eugene “Bishop” Tanniehill from the May/June 2003 issue that I mentioned earlier. Nelson narrates Tanniehill’s story from his poverty and substance-abuse ravaged childhood and adolescence (“A little heroin...That alcohol. Look what it drove me to,” Tanniehill notes [17]), to his days as a “fresh fish” at Angola in 1960, to his current status as “the most sought after preacher at Angola, by both the inmate Christian organizations and Chaplains’ Department” (17). A seventh-grade dropout, Tanniehill was sent to Angola for murder, armed robbery, and three counts of forgery. He held a number of jobs within the prison and even was one of the infamous “inmate guards” that were known for their utter

brutality: “They handed him a rifle and told him to beat unruly prisoners into submission and shoot anyone trying to escape,” (18) Nelson states. While Tanniehill claims that he took the job for protection and as a way to work toward early release, he admits the horrors of this practice.

Much of this profile highlights Tanniehill’s transformation to the well-respected preacher that he is today: “Nearly every evening of the week Tanniehill is preaching at one Angola service or another. He travels around the prison with the Angola Gospel Group three times a week, sermonizing between songs” (22). His current assigned duty involves ministering to the men in extended lockdown. Tanniehill also works with a group of “peer educators” (22) that help younger inmates set goals and find a path towards their own rehabilitation; as noted in the article, he offers inmates a path toward hope in what can be a hopeless place:

See, when you don’t know how to think constructively, you are going to be in big trouble, because you step into the bounds of worry and grief and find yourself institutionalized and paralyzed mentally. But if you know how to think constructively, then you will find you can give yourself courage. (22)

As readers, we are shown a man who contributes to his community and leads what is essentially a model life. Yet despite this extended good behavior and his contributions, he still remains behind bars with little chance for parole. While this article offers an account of a transformed man, it also critiques the practice of extended incarceration in a larger sense. “During his four decades in prison,” Nelson notes, “he has witnessed beatings, rapes, suicides and killings. But mostly he has watched other lifers wither away and die of sickness or old age” (16). Tanniehill is reported to only have two small disciplinary infractions in 40 years, and both inmates and administrators laud his actions as a minister and counselor. Yet his good behavior counts little in his quest for freedom: “[H]e applied for gubernatorial clemency in 1976 and received a pardon board recommendation to cut his life sentence to 45 years. The governor,

however, ignored it. He tried again in 1982 and 1986, each time with the pardon board issuing the same recommendation” (21). His most recent appeal in 1997 “is still on file at the governor’s office, unacted upon” (21).

Tanniehill’s story is indeed touching; we are given an account of a man who, like the rest of the aging inmate population, is well past his years of criminality and who actively works toward helping others.²⁰ “My years in prison have not been in vain,” Tanniehill argues at the conclusion of the piece, “I’m fulfilling a mission” (22). Yet underneath this heartbreaking portrait is a critique of the practice that keeps inmates behind bars longer than needed. Essentially, Nelson shows that nothing can be gained by keeping a man such as Tanniehill behind bars. His article does not directly attack those who enact and maintain strict sentencing laws, yet this piece shows a man transformed – a man who could be of use to the world outside of prison: “I’m engaged to four churches for when I get out,” Tanniehill states, “They’re begging for me” (16). But the image we are left with is of a man who, while dedicated to aiding the lives of his fellow inmates, is an aging, peaceful man who will probably never again taste freedom.

Features such as these give readers a chance to get detailed, in-depth accounts of inmates and inmate life at Angola prison. Like the other sections of *The Angolite*, they provide a counter-identity that works against what Myers describes as “the portrayal of prison life in movies and television, which often show men who do nothing but plot and plan to prey on the weak and helpless” (20). While many inmate magazines and newspapers mainly acted as information-based newsletters aimed mainly at an internal audience, as Morris notes in his history of the penal press, *The Angolite* and the features it offers in each issue help us see these

²⁰ Many criminologists and penal administrators believe that prisoners become significantly less dangerous after the age of 40, although reasons are not clearly understood. See Fields for more information on “criminal menopause” and recent legislation pertaining to alternative incarceration for inmates. For an inmate perspective, see Rideau, “Why Prisons Don’t Work.”

inmates as something other than the identity that is imposed on them by dominant prison narratives. The theme of transformation seen throughout many of these articles and columns is one of the most important aspects of *The Angolite*. Via these writings, staffers can form connections with both fellow inmates as well as readers in the world beyond bars. This theme will take center stage in Chapter Four, where I analyze articles mainly drawn from the 1970s and 1980s that offer representations of inmates taking part in educational activities and appealing for further opportunities for training in reading and writing. We will also see narratives that show inmates collaborating to help improve their collective situation – working together to rise above the bloodstained nature of Angola life.

“He knows my fate” -- Religion in Prison

Society’s outsiders have often found agency via religion and religious writing and speech practices. Anne Stockdale-Giesler has written on the rhetorical power of spirituals within the African-American slave community, and Susan Cahill’s introduction to *Wise Women: Over Two Thousand Years of Spiritual Writing by Women* notes that “spirituality itself is a fertile source of...human liberation” (xvi). Obviously, religion played a strong part in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, where such speakers as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the young Jesse Jackson, among others, incorporated traditional Christian tropes into the rhetoric of liberation and freedom for all. While religion, like literacy, has often been used as a method of exclusion, it can also act as a force for social change and a venue for outsider voices, such as prisoners, to find a place within a larger discussion.

“Faith-based” rehabilitation has been part of the rhetoric of Angola since the late 1990s. The underlying concept for such a structure can be found in Louisiana Revised Statute 15:828.2: “The Legislature finds and declares that faith based programs offered in state and private

correctional institutions and facilities have the potential to facilitate inmate institutional adjustments, to help inmates assume personal responsibility, and to reduce recidivism.” In recent years, the concept of faith-based prison programs has become increasingly popular, leading to both support and criticism.²¹ At Angola, the most active program within the faith-based agenda is the Angola Extension Campus of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS). In light of the removal of Pell Grants and the majority of college-level opportunities for inmates that took place during the Clinton administration, NOBTS provides the only four-year degree program at LSP; however, its concentrations of study are limited to such subjects as Christian counseling and ministry. In terms of other religious programming, revivals and gospel music concerts are quite common at LSP, and several different Christian denominations send volunteers to aid with counseling, worship services, and healing ministries.

Such activities are covered in the regularly appearing column “Religion in Prison.” Even before this column officially began, religious activities were a common theme for *Angolite* articles. Again, like the representation of wardens and staff members, the role of religion – specifically, traditional/fundamentalist strains of Christianity – is quite complicated. One could argue that religion is merely a colonizing force within a community defined by unbalanced power relations; others might argue that in a place commonly seen as “without hope,” religious services and meetings – regardless of denomination -- offer a type of solace that is rarely considered a part of the landscape of the penitentiary.

The coverage offered in “Religion in Prison,” like the other regularly appearing columns, is divided into sub-sections and offers accounts of events sponsored by such groups as Full Gospel, Cowboys for Christ, Catholic Ministries (over 1,000 inmates are Roman Catholic, as is

²¹ For a discussion of faith-based prison programming, see Jacqui Goddard, “Florida’s new approach to inmate reform: A ‘faith-based’ prison.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. 24 December 2003. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1224/p01s04-usju.html>>

to be expected in a Louisiana prison), St. John's Institutional Baptist Brotherhood, and the Students of Islam. Again, while such a column might seem to be aimed only at an inmate audience, these reports that narrate events ranging from music programs and church meetings to facility expansion continue one of *The Angolite's* main rhetorical functions: the presentation of a counter-identity that can challenge pre-conceived notions of inmates.

Articles such as those from the October/November/December issue relate services as "filled to near capacity" with "a large number of outside guests" (56) where inmates can often "be with their families" (57). A Catholic volunteer is quoted as saying "Each year I come up to Angola trying to lift their spirits...they always end up lifting mine" (57). Pastors and lay ministers are shown offering solace to prisoners in population (able to work and take part in activities such as clubs), in lockdown, on death row, and in the prison infirmary wards. The work of inmate ministers is also represented: "It just takes a minute of our time," one states, "to stop and talk to a brother in the dorm or yard and invite him to mass...Sometimes they say no and walk away. But sometimes, they appreciate me taking time to ask and show up for mass" (58). Inmates are also shown as involved with committee duties, such as keeping a newsletter for Catholic inmates, restoring a dilapidated chapel, and educating other inmates as to the nature of religious practices that are less known in the Angola prison community such as Islam. Other issues profile such events as a reunion of prisoner missionaries who were trained at LSP but sent via NOBTS to other prisons for ministry work, dramatic presentations by Christian theatre organizations, and an interfaith gathering that brought together over 300 inmates in a call for Christian unity.

Because of the increase in faith-based programming at LSP, such coverage seems to be right in line with *The Angolite's* explicit goal of reporting activities that take place at Angola.

“Religion in Prison” might not be surprising or as cutting edge as other current columns or features, but as a regularly appearing segment it offers yet another angle to the argument implied within each issue of *The Angolite*. If religious activities are valued as noble pursuits by both readers and prison staff members, and if such activities actually provide both a literal and metaphorical sanctuary for LSP inmates, then it makes sense to give such practices a featured presence in the pages of *The Angolite*.

“A man can’t give his address out to bad company...”
– Source-based writing and Non-inmate writers

The ability to use source materials fairly has been a long-standing component of most college-level composition classes and introductory journalism courses. Such a practice allows readers to make judgments about accountability and honesty. While narratives, editorials, and profiles make up the majority of *The Angolite*’s current pages, several regularly occurring columns are strong examples of source-based writing and draw upon legal rulings, newspaper articles, scholarly books, and other mainstream texts. The meaningful use of such materials helps *Angolite* writers – again, positioned by the dominant sphere as outsiders – to gain a further sense of credibility. For example, “Legal Roundup” – a column provided by a number of contributing, non-*Angolite* staff writers – provides clear explanations of state and federal rulings and developments. While *The Angolite* is not completely centered on legal issues like *Prison Legal News* (another popular inmate written publication based in Washington State), this column not only directly connects to *The Angolite*’s inmate audience but also helps to represent *Angolite* writers as ethical journalists who can present source materials effectively and honestly.

Douglas Dennis, a 44-year veteran of Angola and *Angolite* staff writer who once actually escaped from prison, is the key writer behind “News Briefs,” “Straight Talk,” and the regularly appearing book review section. While “Straight Talk” simply provides a two to four page list of

various passages from current media organized by topics such as “Prison Life” or “The War on Drugs” (each with a full citation and occasional brief commentary), “News Briefs” functions more like a traditional round up of recent developments interconnected by Dennis’ riveting prose style. In the issues published during 2003, Dennis discusses such topics as the Prison Rape Elimination Act, exorbitant phone rates for families calling their loved ones in prison, voting restrictions on ex-prisoners, “boot camps” for juvenile inmates, state-level clemency, sports therapy, DNA testing, and restorative justice. Each sub-column provides full source materials and a balanced account of each topic.

Dennis’ book reviews are also an excellent example of an inmate who has become an expert in a range of penal issues. More than just a review, this section often connects scholarly accounts to concerns closer to Angola. For example, in his review of *Aging Prisoners: Crisis in American Corrections*, Dennis shows how author Ronald Aday’s conclusions strike on a local level: “With half its total population 40 and older, Angola has become far more peaceful than in its bloody past and far more needy of medical attention. Health services will consume more than \$14 million during the 2003/2004 fiscal year, or 14.6 percent of Angola’s \$97 million budget” (July/Aug/Sept 48). Such connections not only help develop his reviews but also provide further implicit arguments against popular conceptions of Angola and prison culture in general. While book reviews are common in mainstream journals and magazines, the mere fact that these reviews are composed by a long-term inmate shows how an outsider can use mainstream genres to articulate a voice that might be deemed as valid by non-inmate, “insider” readers.

In a 1993 interview with *The Caucus Quarterly*, Dennis offers the following comment about the need for media accountability and calls attention to *The Angolite*’s sense of responsibility; such claims seem far from our own conceptions of prison life:

I think the media, including us, print media and electronic media, have a responsibility to the public. They're always so quick to holler about freedom of the press, and I'd be in the front ranks waving the placard, too, but where you have a freedom you have a responsibility, and in my opinion I see a major shirking of responsibility...(“About TV”)

Sources aren't the only aspect of *The Angolite* that comes from outside the prison gates. It is worth noting here that occasionally non-inmate writers contribute large articles to *The Angolite*. Many of these contributors come from academia, such as Burk Foster, a professor of criminal justice at University of Louisiana-Lafayette who collaborated with Rideau and Dennis on *The Wall is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana*. Other writings come from legal professionals, such as the reprint of Judge Ginger Berrigan's explanation of the pardon board process “Straining the Quality of Mercy.” Berrigan's article, originally featured in *Louisiana Law Review*, shows how and why the chances of a Louisiana convict getting clemency are quite slim. Keith Nordyke, a Baton Rouge attorney who has successfully represented several Angola prisoners before parole and pardon boards, is also a frequent contributor; like Berrigan's 2002 *Angolite* article, Nordyke takes the pardon/parole issue to task, explaining the twists and turns of such procedures for both inmate and non-inmate audiences.

Including outside contributors in *Angolite* issues performs a number of rhetorical functions. Obviously, as shown by the few examples above, these writers offer professional accounts and explanations of topics that are of key interest to the inmate audience; likewise, they offer expertise for non-inmate readers who wish to educate themselves on penal procedures. But more importantly, one might argue that such inclusion allows *The Angolite* to be seen as a collaborative text; even the simple, physical connection of including an article written by a “freeman” in the same space as a piece by an inmate helps readers see *Angolite* writers – and perhaps inmates in general – as something other than the illiterate and brutally violent figures

that we often conceptualize. As a rhetorical act, the presence of non-inmate professionals gives *The Angolite* yet another way of portraying themselves in a range of roles that seem far from the world of the “prisoner.” Such writings provide yet another level of legitimacy for *The Angolite* and an alternative method for these writers to enter mainstream discussions of penal issues and prisoner concerns.

“Sometimes it gets so hard, you see...” –
Angolite Prose and Poetry

While *The Angolite* features a staff of regularly contributing writers, each issue concludes with sections of poetry and prose writing submitted by Angola inmates as well as prisoners from other institutions. The majority of these poems and prose pieces (which even occasionally include short dramatic works and pieces that sound like current hip-hop lyrics) employ similar tropes, such as end-rhyme, fixed stanzas (much like gospel and blues music), and themes such as redemption, choices, pathways, and a living connection with the divine. One could argue that such writings act as a web that connects prisoners in various locations. More importantly, a writer who sees his work published within *The Angolite* gets the same satisfaction as any writer working towards recognition. Each section is introduced by noting that such writings are published “in the name of freedom of expression”; while most work draws upon the physical space of the prison as inspiration, it’s important to remember that this work has the ability to go beyond the gates of LSP and into the hands of non-inmate readers.

As noted by Wilson, “prison is spatially constructed as a total institution (Goffman 1961), controlled by physical and metaphorical demarcation (Cressey 1961), where hierarchies of power rule the establishment (Sykes 1970)” (“Four Days...” 72). While writing poetry or creative prose might not be “necessarily high on the literacy-related agenda of people” in the world outside the prison (“Four Days...” 71), the literacy acts represented in these sections of *The*

Angolite are a valuable commodity amongst Angola inmates. Such written work shows inmates creating their own space and, like *Angolite* writers, working against the numbing power of the total institution. By including such creative work, *The Angolite* becomes even more of a collaborative effort among inmates.

Like the articles from non-inmate writers, the poems offered at the end of many *Angolite* issues by Aaron Neville – a Grammy Award winning vocalist and member of the Neville Brothers, an immensely popular rhythm and blues vocal group from New Orleans – can be seen as a deliberately deployed rhetorical strategy. While the writing of “experts” plays a variety of roles, Neville’s poetry allows a certain type of identification for inmate readers. Neville served six months for automobile theft at the age of 18, and became addicted to heroin during his sentence. A frequent contributor – “*The Angolite*’s Honorary Staff Poet” – who has performed both solo gospel music and with the Neville Brothers at Angola, Neville’s poems are placed between the “Sounding Off” prose responses and “Expressions,” the section reserved for inmate-written poetry. While including prison poems from sites other than LSP might allow inmates to feel a connection to others in their situation, Neville’s submissions fall right in line with one of the main themes of *The Angolite* – that a prisoner can redeem himself via a multiplicity of literacies such as songwriting or poetry.

By including Neville – a name known by most Louisianans – and by explicitly noting his troubled past in a sidebar to each piece, inmate readers not only see his poetic work as perhaps “equal” to the inmate-written poetry included in *Angolite* issues, but also see another example of a man from among their own ranks who has become a success story, who is freed of the prison chains and bars that define the existence of every Angola inmate. As seen in this passage from a

recent issue, Neville's words reverberate with the themes of survival, resistance, and redemption that are prime motifs of *Angolite* writing:

All I have is today, 'cause yesterday is already gone
I'm not promised tomorrow and, like I said, the days aren't very long
So I gotta do all I can before the sun goes down tonight
And say a prayer that I open my eyes to see the morning light...
("As The Sun Goes Down" Jan/Feb 2003, 61)

Literary scholars might shudder at the creative writing that is found within *The Angolite* and the other few prison publications that remain; they are not examples of what most MFA workshop leaders would call "good writing" – the clichés, the forced rhymes, the litanies of abstraction.

Chris Green, in a recent *College English* article, recalls his own aesthetic shock after receiving a batch of inmate written poems while working as editor of the *Indiana Review*:

Yet, I was moved that these men had been able to write poetry and voice the injustices of our judicial system. I began thinking about voice and violence, criminal justice and couplets, creative writing and racial profiling, loss and literacy. I was confronted with the fact that who writes a poem and the circumstances under which they compose affect my critical reaction...[These poems] were designed to hammer a reader's denial into wrought awareness, and their abstractions such as "justice" became a palpable testimony about the bludgeoning of the American judicial system. (153)

Within the context of the prison, the poetry and short fiction included within these sections of *The Angolite* is indeed incredibly powerful. As Green argues, pieces such as these work as testimony that forces readers – especially "free" readers – to re-consider their understanding of the prison system and the men held within its barricades. The "Sounding Off" and "Expressions" sections of *The Angolite* allow inmates who are not officially sanctioned staffers a space to contribute to a text that is circulated throughout their own prison as well as to readers

outside the boundaries of LSP. Such an opportunity, when considering the typical inmate's limited contact with the world outside of prison, is incredibly rare in the prison world.²²

“To live outside the law” – Some Concluding Remarks

At the conclusion of the second chapter to *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, Robert P. Yagelski considers the oft-cited chapter “Saved” from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* – perhaps “the quintessential American fable about literacy” (54) as self-improvement and even as redemption. In Malcolm X's narrative, Yagelski argues:

literacy is about possibility and power, a means of writing a way into a society that had written him off and working toward changing that society...It is an entrance to worlds of knowledge that were closed off to him...And it is a means of constructing identity and claiming agency.” (45)

Like Wilbert Rideau and the staff members of *The Angolite* from its first issue to its current status as one of the few long surviving members of the penal press, Malcolm X wrote “within and yet against” the dominant ideology in his historical moment (Yagelski 46). Their writing does not change the fact that they committed crimes or shattered lives. The writers of *The Angolite* are also aware of the limits of their agency – that their work towards social change, when faced with the current national attitude towards incarceration, might be in vain. But they continue to write and research and publish; in short, it sustains them. Both Malcolm's autobiographical self-fashioning and the various texts that make up the collective history of *The Angolite* are firmly rooted in an attempt to enter a discourse that is beyond the street or the prison cell. We will see more of this theme of transformation and connection via literacy practices in Chapter Four. Like Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham Jail – perhaps his most poignant civil rights document – *Angolite* writers ironically transform the southern penitentiary

²² For a close look inside a prison-based creative writing workshop, see the recent documentary film *What I Want My Words to Do To You*.

into a site of identity formulation and a rallying point for freedom.²³ One might argue that *The Angolite* is simply Bedlam with a printing press – a freak show of sorts that asks readers to gaze upon the implausibly literate inmates positioned in a space that evokes connotations of rape and extreme violence. But such a claim denies the intense meaning that writing has for these staffers and their readership.

The sub-headings for this chapter are taken from Bob Dylan’s 1966 song “Absolutely Sweet Marie.” As a former volunteer and researcher at Angola, I listened to this song repeatedly as I drove north from my home in Baton Rouge to work with an inmate-tutoring group at LSP and to meet with *Angolite* writers during four months in 2004; I draw upon these experiences in my interchapters. While these men might be considered “outside the law,” their collective work as writers is an inspiring attempt to express a counter-identity that is far from the one imposed on them by dominant narratives. As “outsiders,” their journalistic honesty and integrity helps them, if only in glimpses and moments, to be seen as ethical, responsible *insiders* with voices that are worthy of recognition. As noted by Rideau and as seen in the work of the current *Angolite* staff, such writing functions as socio-political action and as a call to reconsider our national understanding of prison culture:

The Angolite is one of the few instruments left us through which to convey realities and to chip away at the monstrous image the public has conceived of us...In that context, *The Angolite* and its achievements must be regarded as a symbolic hoisting of the flag for those prisoners struggling to transcend their tragic mistakes, their personal problems and the pain of their life-situation in search of something better and decent in life (Morris 167, originally *The Angolite*, March/April 1979, 3).

²³ See Baker’s “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” *Public Culture* 7(1): 3-33.

**First Count:
Where LA 66 Dead Ends**

“Highway 66, which dead-ends at the gates of the prison, snakes through the Tunica Hills, a refreshing change of terrain in pancake-flat Louisiana. It is cooler and greener in the hills, and some of the branches of the trees arch across the road and bathe it in shadow...About five miles from the prison I see a hand-painted sign nailed to a tree: ‘Do not despair. You will soon be there.’...There are red and yellow zinnias all along the road, and the grass is neatly trimmed. Mottled black-and-white cattle browse in a field of green. I see a column of inmates, mostly black, marching out to soybean and vegetable fields, their hoes over their shoulders. Behind and in front of the marching men, guards on horseback with rifles watch their charges” (24).

Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., *Dead Man Walking – An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*.

Prejean’s juxtaposition of lush flora and marching, field-working inmates rang through my head as I drove to Angola for the first time as a potential researcher in early spring of 2003. As a student at Winthrop University in my home state of South Carolina, *Dead Man Walking* was the first book I had ever read about Angola, about the death penalty and penal farms and even about Louisiana in a sense. While reading for my doctoral exams, I tried to learn as much as I could about the history of Louisiana prisons as well as the hidden world of inmate journalism. But I had no idea how to begin a study of such a unique and fascinating news magazine, much less how to enter the world of Angola prison as a welcomed researcher.

And how could I not despair, despite the heeding of the hand-made sign that Prejean briefly notes in the above passage: over 5,000 inmates locked away in a place with a history of violence that shocked the nation on several occasions throughout both the 19th and 20th centuries; the home of Louisiana’s Death Row, which currently holds eighty-six men awaiting execution in a state that rarely offers pardons; a place marked by fear and hopelessness. And then I thought of the bodies of victims; inmates at Angola are typically there because they are guilty of murder or other dreadful crimes such as multiple rape or manslaughter. At night, I would thumb the

pages of Deborah Luster's photographic collection *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* and stare at hollow eyes, hardened hands, scarred skins. I watched Stark and Arbus' documentary *The Farm* – another attempt, like *The Angolite*, to show inmates as human beings despite the horrific nature of their crimes – dozens of times, transfixed on the images of Angola and the men who counted their days there. Despair, despair indeed. Yet the unique position of *The Angolite* – a group of writers who continued to practice and publish their craft despite all of this pain (and perhaps even because of it?) – made me keep pressing onward.

So what led me to this drive up LA Highway 66, the road that cuts west off of 61 and dead ends at the main gates of Louisiana State Penitentiary, was a telephone call from Dr. John Robson. Robson is a professor and pastor from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary – the religious college that had founded a small campus at Angola in 2002 and hoped to establish campuses at other prisons across the nation. NOBTS offers degrees in such fields as Christian Counseling and various ministries. As noted in the NOBTS Mission Statement, the college “exists to equip leaders to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandments through the local church and its ministries.”²⁴ In the wake of Pell Grant removals for inmate education and the death of funding for even the most basic of inmate/college programming during the Clinton administration, NOBTS was the only game in town.

Robson was looking to hire a temporary adjunct faculty member to help with first-year writing courses and had called the Louisiana State University English Department. The director of first-year writing knew that I was interested in Angola prison as a research site and gave him my home phone number. While I was skeptical of faith-based prison initiatives (and especially their connections to prison privatization such as in Florida) for a variety of reasons, despite my own sense of faith, I accepted his offer to visit the Angola campus and to meet some of his

²⁴ See <http://www.nobts.edu/About.html>

students as his guest. Over coffee and cookies at his home in Baton Rouge, he described the aims of the program and the power that faith-based rehabilitation had when it came to inmates. His classrooms were packed to capacity – usually forty to fifty men in a single Introduction to Composition class, for example – and he was certain that such a program as NOBTS was the future of prison programming. As we spoke, I told him about my own interests in Angola and *The Angolite* – how I was amazed at how this publication stayed active – stayed alive – despite massive changes in public opinion towards incarceration over the past few decades. He offered to introduce me to the wardens to pitch my project. As I noted in my acknowledgements, I do not feel that I would have had nearly the access to LSP that I did without Robson’s help.

Still, despite such kindness and faith in my project, I could not see the justification of having the vast majority of educational resources within a particular prison attached explicitly to a religious institution – no matter what denomination it represented. I was told that a few Muslims and members of other faiths had been accepted by the program and were active in their studies. Although I never had the chance to talk to any of these men, I often thought of them. While the vast majority of inmates are assigned jobs at LSP, the inmates who are accepted to NOBTS are classified as “students” with their work day spent in the classroom or the small library and computer center (that is not, for security reasons, connected to the internet) – a far more comfortable setting, I thought, than the work fields.

As I approached the gates of the prison, I could see in the distance a line of inmates marching towards the fields that stretch toward the Mississippi River. The various buildings that I could see from the main road looked almost like the community college I had taught at just three years before this moment – white block structures connected by covered walkways. Yet the tall fences and concertina wire and guard towers spread across the fields were hardly part of

any world that I had previously known. And like Prejean in the lyrical passage that introduces this section, I could hardly believe the natural beauty – the lush grass, the manicured flowerbeds and towering live oaks – that marked the landscape so known for pain and punishment.

*

Perhaps one of the most illuminating and insightful books in recent years about the subject of American incarceration is Joseph T. Hallinan's *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation*. Similar to Carleton's history of the Louisiana penal system, Hallinan focuses on "the merger of punishment and profit" (xi) and questions the massive increase in the number of American prisons: "whether we were building prisons not because we needed them but because we wanted them" (xiii). Yet Carleton's text concludes in the 1970's (before the prison boom fueled by Reagan era drug wars) and limits itself to chronicling what is, essentially, the transformation of Angola from a slave plantation to a privately owned penal farm to, finally, a state-owned prison whose wardens are chosen on the basis of partisanship and political placement. And, as always, "As far as Louisiana was concerned," notes Carleton, "the best penal system...was one that restricted its operations to the confinement of criminals and the making of money" (105). Wardens with advanced degrees and lengthy penology pedigrees are now hired by the state to run Angola, and it is clear that LSP is a far better place than it was three decades ago when Carleton's history concludes. There have been few reported inmate murders on Cain's watch, and there are certainly more opportunities for inmates now in terms of spiritual and educational growth than there ever have been in Angola's history.

Hallinan picks up our national narrative of confinement in the 1990's and hypothesizes the future of punishment: the new prison, the supermax – a structure that is always positioned in remote, rural places: "the new American city" (20) founded on fear and centered on control. The

population of these new cities is skyrocketing. As shown in a 1997 US Department of Justice study, the prison experience on any level (county jail, state prison, federal supermax, etc) is becoming more and more common; one out of eleven men will be imprisoned during his lifetime. And for black males, the figure is even more staggering – more than one out of every four (Hallinan xiii). Hallinan’s examination – a riveting collection of narratives and case studies that draw upon the voices of inmates, prison staff members, wardens, and members of communities where prisons have affected local economies – connects national “get tough on crime” attitudes on both sides of the political spectrum to the immense possibility of profit for local communities who allow (and, at times, even welcome with open arms) prisons to become part of their economic fabric. On one side of a fence, a sea of black faces stippled with specks of white and lighter brown; on the other, white communities.

Because of the remote nature of Louisiana State Penitentiary, a community known as the B-Line developed near Angola’s eastern boundary. The families of guards and other LSP employees live in this community, sometimes called “The Safest Town in Louisiana.” At one moment in *The Farm*, we are shown images of a youth-league baseball game – an image that conjures Americana and suburban family structures – that takes place mere minutes from Angola’s main gates. It is often the case that grandfathers, fathers, and sons (and, more recently, daughters) all work as part of Angola’s employee structure. While this case of a small, rural community quite removed from the quaint town of St. Francisville (about twenty miles or so away from Angola’s main gate) and even further from the state capitol in Baton Rouge seems a bit different from Hallinan’s and others’ connections between penitentiaries and profit, I couldn’t help but think of how the presence of Angola Prison created not one, but two communities defined entirely by Louisiana’s reliance on incarceration.

Hallinan avoids the simple, and faulty, causal argument that people are imprisoned so that white elites can make a profit; however, as he argues in his Introduction, "...the prison industry's economic significance is now so vast that it contributes to a political climate in which being tough on crime is on every lip and in every platform...Crime is big business, and the people who earn their living from it can be expected to protect the status quo" (xiii-xiv). From long-distance phone services to Eddie Bauer sportswear – veritable cottage industries where cheap prison labor is used by major corporations in a new version of the prison-lease system that was pervasive just after the American Civil War – to kickbacks from corporations such as Proctor and Gamble who provide such basics as shampoo and deodorant, it appears that "there was no limit to the ways American executives could devise to cash in on the prison boom" (xiv).

Yet the majority of the 18,000 acres at Angola are dedicated to farming. "To keep the inmates constructively active," as the website for Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum notes, "the majority of the maximum and medium custody inmates work eight-hours a day, five days a week in the farm lines." The main crops are corn and soybeans; other crops include wheat, cotton, and vegetables; a beef herd of 1,500 cattle are also kept. In many ways, then, Louisiana State Penitentiary is an anachronism, a space contained and defined by Louisiana's reliance on agriculture as its primary method of dealing with long-term inmates – a reliance that has hardly changed since the days of Sam Jones, the first warden of Angola once the prison had moved from downtown Baton Rouge (the corner of Laurel and 9th Street, to be exact – now an empty lot bordered by dilapidated, abandoned houses yet only a few blocks from both hipster bars filled with college students and the Louisiana State Capitol) to its current location north of St. Francisville immediately after the Civil War in 1869. The chronology is important here both for Angola and for the prison institution on a national level:

Slavery in the United States did not end after the Civil War; it merely changed forms. The necessary legal transformation was effected in 1865 by the very amendment to the Constitution – Amendment 13 – that abolished the old form of slavery: ‘Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.’ Amendment 13 actually wrote slavery into the Constitution of the United States, but only for those people defined as criminals. (Franklin, *Prison Writing* 4)

Angola’s consistent focus on agriculture throughout the decades seems strange in that as late as 1960, only 7.2% of the state’s total population worked as farmers or within the larger system of agribusiness, yet almost all of its prisoners spent time in the fields (Carleton 7). “Because most convicts were black,” Carleton notes in his description of Angola during the early 20th century, “little more than agricultural work and Sunday preaching needed to be provided to effect rehabilitation of the inmates” (87). Hallinan shows how little this lack of emphasis on inmate rehabilitation has changed on a national level: “When the pollster Lou Harris surveyed Americans in 1970, his company found that 73 percent of them thought the primary purpose of prison should be rehabilitation. By 1995, only 26 percent did” (xiv).

While alternative prison-work such as a metal fabrication shop and a mattress and broom factory has been developed in recent years, the penal farm, Carleton argues, is “an institution uniquely Southern, which in Louisiana still serves as the sacrosanct nucleus of penal operations” (14). The existence of the penal farm at Angola allowed, at times, for the prison to be fairly self-reliant and, therefore, excluded from tax revenue; throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, “was the assumption that certain institutions, prisons especially, should pay their own way and thus require no appropriations at all. In Louisiana, this notion had had its adherents from the very beginning, and ‘self-support’ continued to be the objective of the state’s penal policy” (Carleton 87). Granted, such “self-reliance” was maintained by spending minimal dollars on basic inmate needs. As historian T. Harry Williams points out in his extensive biography of

former Governor Huey Long, “Public opinion, and hence the legislature, has been reluctant to vote money to support convicts on anything but a subsistence level, and Angola has generally been operated as a primitive and sometimes brutal place of detention for criminals who are expected to remain criminals...” (576).

Furthermore, Carleton shows throughout his text that “the terms ‘convict,’ ‘slave,’ ‘Negro,’ and ‘farm work’ have remained interchangeable in the mind of institutional Louisiana” (7). Even Stack, Arbus, and Rideau’s recent Sundance Award winning documentary on Angola chooses “the farm” as its primary focus and its driving metaphor. As a space, it is expected to maintain itself and, therefore, stay as far off the public opinion radar as possible – the major thread of Carleton’s argument. And while it is difficult to really see the actual Angola farm from the main roads – just towers, fences, buildings, a water tower decorated with a giant mural of a Native American in war paint that I later found out was designed by an inmate artist – its presence completely shadows both Angola’s bloody past and its current status.

Such a physical space as Angola is far from the landscapes of more recent journalistic explorations of prison such as Hallinan’s document. I cannot help but consider both the explicit and implied connections between slavery and the penal farm – constructions of brute muscle and traditional masculinity where power is held from the saddle seat and the shotgun. When Hallinan focuses on a penal farm – specifically, the Garza and McConnell units in Beeville, Texas, where inmates raise everything “from hogs to jalapenos” (3) while watched by armed guards on horseback (a practice that is still used at Angola; inmates will spend far more time working menial jobs or simply sitting in six-by-eight foot cells for twenty-three hours a day than participating in rehabilitation programs, counseling, job training, or school) – he notes that

“Almost no place in America still treats inmates like this, and I had wanted to see this piece of living history before it died” (3). Ironically, Hallinan never reports on Angola.

*

Criminologists Jeff Ferrell and Mark S. Hamm, in their collection *Ethnography on the Edge*, offer the following warning about the difficulty of scholarly inquiry within deviant communities:

...effective field research demands that the researcher be submerged in the situated logic and emotion of criminality...and thus be willing to abandon in part the security of pre-existing and professional identities. In this sense, engaged field research doesn't just risk existential disorientation; it all but guarantees it. (8)

As I walked through the wings of the education building with the NOBTS professor – a man who clearly cared about making lives better for inmates in any way he could – I considered how my identity (white, young, male, middle-class, teacher, *free*) would fit into this place, how inmates – recalling Foucault again – would watch me watching them, all under the electronic eyes of security cameras. I was asked to say a few words to a class led by the professor who invited me as his guest. As I approached the front of the classroom filled with over forty inmates hoping to become inmate-pastors – a powerful identity considering the role of religion throughout Angola's history – my hands turned icy cold. Throughout the day, several of the students pulled me aside, whispering with gleeful smiles, “Are you our new teacher?”

Who were we in this situation? Inmates? Students? Instructors? Everyone in the room had their reasons for being present in that classroom with windows that looked out over the expansive, glossy-green fields; those sitting in desks were surrounded by piles of textbooks, notepads, handmade crosses and well-worn bibles – signs that marked them as something other

than inmates despite the sameness of their pale blue prison-issued work shirts and denim trousers.

Although I am steeped in recent developments in literacy studies that critique the notion of literacy as always positive and always liberatory, and although I am aware of the dangers inherent when a researcher in the field positions himself or herself as a missionary, I must note here that I do believe in transformations – that the ability to read and write well are incredibly strong elements that can help us see both ourselves and our place in the world. This belief in the power of transformation, the power of change, is drawn not only from my personal faith – a scary pair of words, I know, in the academy – but also from my experiences as a writing teacher. While literacy and identity and discourse form incredibly complex matrices of power, one can indeed use literacy as a way to change one’s self and one’s understanding of the world – even if only at the local level. As I looked out at the faces of the inmates in their desks – at men who were learning to read and write so that they might provide a service to others – I was awed.

So I, marked by terms such as “university,” “graduate student,” “researcher,” with my pressed shirt and my tie and my notebook, tried to keep from shaking as I gripped the oak podium and struggled to speak. “God bless you,” I began. “God bless you for reading and writing and trying to become something the world says you can’t be.”

Chapter Three:
“What We Talk About When We Talk About Prison”
– Some Critical Crossroads between Literacy,
the Penal Press, and the Prison-Industrial Complex

“On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside of them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives.”

Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (16)

To help contextualize my analysis of *The Angolite* as an act of resistance against the totalizing nature of the prison experience, we must first examine how the academy has recently contributed to our understanding of the prisoner and prison culture and, in particular, the roles that literacy practices play within the penitentiary system. In the previous chapter, I offered an analysis of *Angolite* issues from 2003 as a way of introducing the publication as a whole as well as the typical contents and themes that can be found in its pages; in Chapters Four and Five, I focus explicitly on two sets of themes – representations of collaboration/education and representations of inmate rape, respectively – to offer a closer look at this news publication and to connect how this literacy practice helps reshape the identities of both *Angolite* staffers and perhaps even the larger inmate population. In this chapter, I draw upon several bodies of scholarship such as the history of the penal press, recent studies in inmate literacy education, and literacy studies to help frame my own study.

Davis’ comment about the hidden life contained by the walls of the prison institution – a life that the penal press and specifically *The Angolite* has tried to describe and critique – implicitly argues for more discussions of how to address the cycle of poverty, illiteracy,

criminality, and incarceration. Her study, which traces the growth of prison populations to the history of slavery and to the hesitance of federal and state governments to address issues of poverty in the United States, attacks the prison-industrial complex as a capitalist venture that preys on poor minorities. Sloop, whose work I addressed in Chapter One, argues that the penal philosophy in the United States has radically shifted to an attitude of “just desserts,” in which incarceration equals only containment and punishment; while there were some efforts to provide rehabilitation and education-oriented programs throughout the decades from the 1950s to the 1970s, the general attitude of “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” has become the dominant ideology when it comes to punishment in more recent decades. The contemporary prisoner, as argued by Sloop, is typically represented in major media sources as an unredeemable and radically violent male who deserves nothing else than to be removed from society. Programs that might help educate or rehabilitate the inmate are generally seen as a waste of tax dollars that could be spent on law-abiding citizens. And, as Davis asserts in her own study, containment, as opposed to rehabilitation, is paramount; after that, we’d rather wash our collective hands of the matter entirely.

Anita Wilson, in her studies of literacies and prison systems in the United Kingdom that will be discussed later in this chapter, offers a statement quite similar to Davis’ claim: “Prison remains outside the parameters of knowledge of most people, and a conventional perception of what it is like, fed by the selective reportage of the media, is often at odds with the reality of prison life” (“Four Days” 67). In a sense, the writing offered in *The Angolite* responds to Davis and Wilson’s claims, in that these inmate writers attempt to render the prison world as they see it. While these writers are certainly aware of their limited power as inmates, they continue to

work and write for a number of reasons, one of which is to account for a lack of public knowledge about the world inside Angola prison.

In this chapter, I examine a number of issues that support the need for an analysis of this interesting literacy practice. *The Angolite*, as I have noted, is one of the few surviving publications of the penal press; I examine the two book-length discussions of the penal press in general to provide a basis for my own study. Furthermore, the longevity and success of *The Angolite* is even more awe-inspiring when placed in the context of the low levels of reading and writing ability that plague the prison system and the difficulties of literacy education systems behind bars; to that end, I discuss one of the few federal surveys of literacy behind bars as well as some accounts from prison educators. Finally, my analysis is grounded in the New Literacy Studies – a scholarly field that calls for detailed documentation of literacy practices in context. After situating this field, I offer discussions of the few recent literacy-oriented studies that account for the world behind bars. While the work of such scholars as Eleanor Novek, Deborah Brandt (who, despite her recent criticism of situated literacy studies, needs to be accounted for in this chapter because of her detailed account of one inmate’s attempts at literacy acquisition), and the aforementioned Anita Wilson is certainly notable and provide a space for further prison literacy research, there are no studies that take an extended account of a prisoner-written news publication in one of the most historically troubled prisons in the United States.

It might seem curious to readers why there are so few studies that examine literacy practices within prison environments. Before turning to the bulk of the chapter, it is useful to best to draw upon Loic Wacquant’s recent essay, “The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” Wacquant’s essay works well as an introduction to this chapter in that he connects together several different and disturbing threads such as the current situation

of the prison system in the United States, the lack of prison based research considering the dramatic increase in the sheer number of prisoners over the past few decades, the lowly status of prison educational programming, and the political and social importance of work that might address these issues. While Wacquant's work is not specifically focused on literacy issues or writing-in-context, his examination of a prison space touches on many of the elements that support the need for studies such as mine that focus on writing and reading behind bars. Yet research *access* to the prison world, according to Wacquant, is difficult if not impossible to obtain – a theme that resonates with Davis and Wilson's statements concerning the lack of public knowledge about prisons.

Although there were some studies from the 1940s through the 1960s that gave researchers glimpses of the world behind bars, "the doors of penitentiaries," Wacquant argues, "were closed to social researchers and severe restrictions were imposed on the diffusion of inmate writings" (384). Despite the closed nature of the prison, Wacquant "gets inside" somehow; the observations that take up much of his essay are horrific to say the least. Wacquant's article takes readers inside the walls of the Los Angeles County Jail, one of the largest detention centers in the United States. He includes samples from his field notes to help give scholars a sense of the harsh physical realities of the prison space: "You would think that you're in a tomb. A subterranean grotto. A safe for men buried alive from society's eyes, ears, and mind" (373). Wacquant notes health and fire code violations, inmate overcrowding, the sheer volume of noise that fills every inch of the prison, and the system of rules and regulations that governs every minute of the prisoners' lives ("one shower and two hours on the roof every week; twenty minute phone 'visits'" [377]). He pays particular attention to the overt caste system within his research site (in which every inmate within the facility is affected by the

activities of various gangs such as the Mexican Mafia, the Black Guerilla Family, and the White Aryan Brotherhood) as well as the high levels of violence: “Indeed, prisoners like to say that there is more violence, hustling, and drugs ‘in the joint’ than outside” (374). Wacquant’s administrative participants such as wardens and prison staff, support this last claim, although it is difficult to establish an exact number of crimes within prison because so many illegal activities are not reported for various reasons.

In short, his descriptions show how the prison works not to rehabilitate but to punish; most of the inmates who return to the free world, he argues, will have gained few skills to help them avoid further criminal activity – a vicious, perpetuating cycle. While it is dangerous to judge the entire prison system via one set of ethnographic descriptions, Wacquant’s attack on the lack of access and public knowledge of what actually happens within our prisons – again, a concern that unites Wacquant with other scholars noted within this chapter – supports a study that examines how inmates attempt to represent themselves via writing and publishing.²⁵

One of the most interesting, and, from my own point of view, infuriating moments within his discussion concerns the education program at the Los Angeles County Jail, “or what passes for it, a dingy room with educational posters plastered over its aging walls” (377). Only forty to sixty inmates – “less than one percent of the jail’s average daily population. At least they won’t consume too much of the jail’s scarce resources” (377) – were able to take part in educational programming such as Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language training, high school level remedial education (and General Education Degree preparation), and Health-Safety-Parenting classes during Wacquant’s initial year as a prison ethnographer. At the state level, he notes, programs directed toward rehabilitation, education, and training are granted less than five

²⁵ My own experiences at LSP, as I describe and analyze in the final interchapter, reiterates Wacquant’s point concerning access issues.

percent of the California carceral budget. These wrenching descriptions are contextualized by the massive changes in the discourse of punishment in the United States during the last three decades: “the gradual replacement of the social-welfare regulation of poverty...with those of a hypertrophic and hyperactive criminal-justice apparatus” (382), the same topic that is the partial focus of Sloop’s work. Our new penal state is trained almost entirely on the lowest rung of the social and economic order:

...the destitute, the disreputable...the colored subproletariat of the big cities, the unskilled and precarious fractions of the working class, and those who reject the ‘slave jobs’ and poverty wages of the deregulated service economy and turn, instead to the informal commerce of the city streets and its leading sector, the drug trade. (382)

Again, while Wacquant is not explicitly engaged in literacy studies, he shows how a federal institution perpetuates economic inequity and, in the end, a permanent prisoner class that lacks literacy skills required for economic advancement outside of the criminal realm. His acerbic descriptions seem quite similar to moments in Denny Taylor’s *Toxic Literacies: Exposing the Injustice of Bureaucratic Texts*. Taylor offers extended case studies of individuals whose lives are completely defined by legal and medical texts that separate them from federal and state-level economic aid. While literacy is often viewed as always positive and emancipating, Taylor shows how a distinct and powerful form of literacy is used to perpetuate the economic status quo:

If you have power and privilege in society, literacy can be used to maintain your social status. You can use print to your advantage and to the disadvantage of others. Laws, regulations, administrative procedures, affidavits, insurance policies, trusts, reports....are all forms of literacy used by those in authority to exercise power over those who are denied such liberty. (10)

One of Taylor’s ethnographic participants, a recovering drug addict named Cindy, is barred from several helpful programs because of a previous drug offense and incarceration. Because she

could not afford legal representation and lacks the agency to successfully navigate the labyrinth of legal discourse on her own, she is completely defined by legal texts as a criminal. “Toxic texts” such as her criminal record will make it much more difficult to find employment or apply for federal or state aid. Literacy, in this case, works against Cindy.

And, unfortunately, Cindy is not alone. According to the U.S. Department of Justice/ Bureau of Justice Statistics, the total corrections population increased 49% from 1990 to 2000 – an increase of 2.1 million men and women; since 1990, the number of male prisoners grew by 77% and female prisoners by 108%. By 2004, the total number of Americans living under the control of the penal system (including federal, state, and county facilities as well as parolees) had reached 6.9 million. The explosive growth in the prison population in the United States is matched by the unprecedented expansion of the penal industry: “Prison operations alone jumped from US \$7 billion in 1980 to US \$44 billion and the number of employees of the criminal justice system doubled in two decades to reach 2 million” (Wacquant 383). Prison, as Hallinan and others have argued (see the previous interchapter) is a major American business. Wacquant notes that the state of California spends more on its prison system than it does on its four-year universities – a shocking example of our state and national obsession with incarceration “in a period during which levels of crime have remained essentially unchanged” (383) since the 1970s.

While the inmate population as well as funds spent on incarceration skyrocketed over the past three decades, “The ethnography of the prison thus went into eclipse at the very moment when it was urgently needed on both scientific and political grounds” (385). Although Wacquant’s purpose is to urge more prison-oriented scholarship, he takes a moment to note the important place of both journalistic accounts of the prison system as well as published inmate writings – one of the few avenues available to learn about everyday life behind bars (385).

Journalism and ethnographic study are hardly synonymous, but such accounts as those provided by *The Angolite* position inmates that live and work within the prison system as experts who are able to give glimpses of prison life to readers on both sides of the prison gates and fences. Granted, such work might totally rely on the blessings of the administration and therefore might not be the most accurate accounts of prison life. Yet it is clear that such writing is held as important by inmates and can, as seen in *The Angolite*, offer striking critiques of the prison system. Furthermore, by participating in *The Angolite*, inmate-writers have an opportunity to partially re-define and transform themselves; they are still criminals, certainly, but they are often recognized by inmates and free readers alike as writers, photographers, and researchers – a drastic difference in a place so removed and controlled.

Again, the previous chapter analyzed various topics and tactics within *Angolite* issues published during 2003 as a way of both introducing the general nature of *The Angolite* and to highlight themes of transformation and redemption that are at the core of this publication; I also chose these particular issues because of my extended conversations with the current *Angolite* staff that informed my understanding of the importance that this literacy practice holds for both writers and inmate-readers. This chapter begins with a brief assessment of the two book-length studies that focus on the penal press – a body of writings that was essentially given a “death sentence” at the same time that Wacquant notes as the end of meaningful prison-oriented academic research. Then, I turn to discussion the National Adult Literacy survey’s focus on prison environments as well as some accounts of inmate-educators to provide a context for the complex writing that is found within *The Angolite*; while many of these studies offer a fairly bleak picture of the inmate world when it comes to literacy ability, I offer some discussions of inmate learning that draw upon emancipatory learning strategies – one of which is written by a

long term inmate within a women's penitentiary – to show some possible avenues for the future of inmate literacy education, a future that includes inmates writing about their own lives, experiences, and concerns about the world behind bars.

While concepts such as emancipation and transformation are at the heart of *The Angolite*, such concepts have been contested in recent literacy-oriented studies. Therefore, I turn to a discussion of literacy studies as well as the few literacy-oriented, prison-based studies that exist as a way to situate my own study. My analysis of *The Angolite* that began in Chapter Two and continues in Chapters Four and Five offers a portrait of a literacy practice that allows for participants to re-envision their status as mere inmates and, as best they can, to improve the quality of their lives. The range of issues I take up here can be read as, essentially, the backdrop of *The Angolite*. While an entire study could easily be dedicated to each topic presented here, their combined effect allows for a clearer understanding of *The Angolite*'s discussions of education and collaboration that are analyzed in Chapter Four as well as their written explorations of prison sex practices that I take up in Chapter Five. Together, these threads offer a portrait of why a prison news publication such as *The Angolite* is a rare yet vitally important literacy practice.

“Extra, Extra, Read All About It!”
– Two Studies of the Penal Press

As I noted in Chapter One, there are very few academic studies of prison journalism. James McGrath Morris' *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars* is the only recently published history of the penal press in the United States. Aside from McGrath's work, only Russell N. Baird's *The Penal Press*, published in 1967, offers an extended academic account of prison journalism practices. Baird relies on a questionnaire-based survey of four hundred fifty two state and federal correctional institutions to gain a sense of how many prison

news publications existed during the early 1960s and to understand their aims, audiences, and relationships with prison authorities. Baird is mainly interested in quantitative work, investigating such questions as how often each paper was published, how prison news publications are supervised, questions of format and size, subscription rates, and issues of printing processes.

Baird also attempts to determine the nature of the relationship between inmate journalists and prison administrators, the value of such publication for both keeper and kept in terms of communication and increased awareness, and the possible rehabilitative and educational uses of such publications. He supplements his survey data by interviewing inmate writers at seven different penitentiaries and reformatories and examining copies of prison newspapers supplied by inmate editors who participated in the study. A chapter is spent introducing the history of the penal press – a topic that Morris develops into his own book length account – and much of the book is dedicated to samples of inmate journalism; Morris' work is not only one of the first anthologies of prison journalism in the United States but also the first extended scholarly discussion of what was then an active community of writers working behind bars.

Early in his text, Baird discusses the interesting relationship between prison administrators and inmate journalists at that moment:

...it is the willingness of prison administrators to foster newspaper and magazines in their institutions that is the most unusual aspect of the prison press. The penal press is an anomaly; authoritarian rule and the printing press historically have been incomparable. And the very confinement of men to prison is, in its essence, a denial of liberty. In the world of American prisons, however, as paradoxical as it may seem, the indulgence of those in authority, plus the seemingly irrepressible desire of their captives to write, to communicate, and to create, have fostered a fascinating branch of the fourth estate that has unusual scope, vigor, and importance. (10).

These claims run counter to the current status of inmate publications at a national level. At the

time, according to his study, there were over two hundred active prison publications as well as several special interest magazines such a prison-oriented Alcoholics Anonymous publication. Such was the era of the “new penology,” in which administrators often granted a certain leniency towards the penal press as a way of offering vocational training, and Baird describes a world where administrators not only allow but encourage the work of prison writers.

In the earliest days of the penal press in the twentieth century, Baird argues, the main objective of these publications from an administration standpoint was to keep inmates occupied: “Prisons were overcrowded; work assignments were not plentiful enough to go around; anything to break the idleness that bred discontent was worth a try” (48). According to his survey, most wardens at the time thought that inmate publications were incredibly helpful for internal communication (clarifying policies, providing information on board meetings, understanding the inmates’ perspective, etc.), for public relations, and for an opportunity in which inmates might gain a sense of service and responsibility (50-53). Inmate staff members who participated in Baird’s study voiced similar goals but also agreed that their main objective was “to tell their story to the outside public” (55):

To these outside readers, and hopefully to more and more “ordinary voters,” the penal press is attempting to present a multifaceted message. First of all, it is trying to get across the idea that prisoners are people, not some special breed of animal that, once caged, should be completely forgotten. Secondly, it is trying to gain acceptance of the principle that penal institutions should be dedicated to rehabilitation rather than punishment. (91)

Other important goals that were noted by inmate writers and editors included creating a site for self-expression (especially among the more literary-oriented journals, although Baird is careful to point out that most publications at the time included both literary and journalistic work), keeping inmates informed of recreational, educational, vocational, and other programs offered within the prison, and providing narratives of inmate achievement.

Yet because Baird's study focuses on prisons, such a tale cannot be all positive. He notes that despite his findings, there was strong disagreement as to the rehabilitative, communicative, educational, and morale boosting merits of the penal press during the early 1960s. He offers accounts of various wardens who were completely against the possibility of an inmate-written news or literacy publication within their facilities – a position that sounds like much like a more recent historical moment. The mere existence of a prisoner-written publication allows for the possibility of critique – even if the administration holds complete control over a publication's content. And, as we know already, dominant institutions will often allow small acts of resistance as a way of further masking their overall power. Yet the growth of penal publications during the first half of the twentieth century, Baird argues throughout his text, is proof of their value despite such problems as resources, finances, and debates over content.

Such themes resonate with Morris' more recent historical study as well as with statements published within the pages of *The Angolite* (which is included in Baird's appendix of active prison publications in the 1960s but is never discussed within the body of his text). *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars* traces the history of important penal publications and offers engaging profiles of the people involved in their development. Early chapters are dedicated to historical accounts of the first wave of prison news publications such as *Forlorn Hope* (the first American prison newspaper, founded in 1800), *The Summary* (which was established by Zebulon Brockway, an important American prison reformer who took a major role in the 1870 American Prison Congress and is considered as the father of the "new penology") and *Our Paper* (based at the Massachusetts Reformatory and founded in 1885). Such newspapers, according to Morris, "were all closely supervised and were not intended to be the organs of their inmate populations" (53); instead, these earliest practitioners of penal journalism

reflected not the ideas and observations of inmate writers but rather voiced the moral righteousness of the turn-of-the-century prison reform movement. Later chapters chronicle such topics as the court battles of *Prison Legal News* (written by two inmates at Washington State Reformatory at Monroe and published outside of prison walls), the censorship of the *Vacavalle Star*, and the history of the penal press' relationship with the rights granted by the First Amendment – rights that fail to extend to inmate journalists.

Unfortunately, prison journalism, as Morris laments, is now essentially a relic, “an artifact of penal history” (187). It is difficult to ascertain an exact number of penal publications currently operating, but Morris notes that while there were over one hundred regularly published prison publications of varying quality during the 1970s and 1980s (and while almost every state prison during the 1930's and 1940s started a prison newspaper, if only for a short while) only a handful remain. Much of Morris' account is spent describing the challenges faced by inmate journalists – the lack of resources, the tenuous relations between writers and administrators (and, at times, between inmate writers and other inmates), and the threats of censorship.

Morris posits several reasons why inmates take up the pen in the name of journalistic freedom. Despite difficult odds, inmates discovered that producing a news publication could be a source of power, promoting reform measures and even providing the basis for lawsuits. They valued the chance to tell their own side of a long-running story concerning American incarceration. Inmate journalists also enjoyed the recognition that occasionally came with their work; as stated by Wilbert Rideau in an interview with Morris: “Before I came to *The Angolite* I was a criminal nobody...Now I am at least someone that is recognizable, that has credibility” (Morris 15). Although this status does not completely negate the totalizing discourse of the prison nor did it really change Rideau's status at the time as an incarcerated felon, the practice of

prison journalism allows inmate participants to see themselves – and perhaps even be seen by others – as something more than simply the status that is imposed upon them by the state. Covering stories about life behind bars allows inmate journalists to feel a sense of investment in their fellow prisoners and to help others; while one could argue that the prison as a site is a “forced community,” inmate writers tend to feel a certain responsibility to champion the needs of their fellow inmates. As I show in Chapter Four, any sort of “we” voiced on behalf of a group of prisoners is an act of resistance, an act that allows inmates to see themselves as human beings who are united, despite whatever differences they have, as part of a similar situation. Finally, the therapeutic elements of expressing one’s self on paper are certainly important. Considering what we know about contemporary prison problems, it seems like the prison press would be an ideal way to boost inmate morale and instill a sense of hope amongst penal populations. In the next chapter, we will see how *Angolite* writers attempt to offer a sense of hope and liberation despite the daily difficulties of prison life.

Morris argues toward the end of his study that prison overcrowding and increased violence, along with recent conservative attitudes among voters and politicians, have led to the demise of the penal press. While C. Paul Phelps, the virtual patron saint of *The Angolite*, initially allowed for that publication to have a semblance of freedom of expression, it is clear that Phelps’ philosophy had little effect outside of the Bayou State. The penal press, because of its various restraints, could never be a total remedy for problems that exist behind prison walls; however, as Morris concludes, the penal press did work “as a means of redress for a disenfranchised segment of our citizenry. For most inmates, there will be no media acting as watchdogs in their community unless there is a prison newspaper” (195).

In terms of my own project, Morris and Baird provide both a historical backdrop of the larger world of the penal press as well as some insights as to the importance such publications held (and still hold, although relatively few remain in publication) for participants. They show how texts such as these could potentially speak for inmates who, by nature of their physical and ideological separation from the rest of society, are often silenced. Yet because of the lack of scholarship in the field of prison journalism, these voices could easily be lost. There are only two articles published since Morris' study that address the remaining active prison publications or that analyze now defunct penal news publications in a historical context. I address these explorations in the final section of this chapter.

Again, as noted by Wacquant, such studies of inmate life are incredibly rare. Yet inquiry in this field is more important than ever because of increased prison populations as well as the low-level literacy abilities that seem synonymous with prison populations in the United States. In the next section of this chapter, I present some of the data from the 1995 National Adult Literacy Survey's exploration of prison literacy ability. When placed in the context of these findings, the complexity and depth of *Angolite* writing seem even more admirable and worthy of academic inquiry.

“Taking Counts” –
A Review of the National Adult Literacy Survey's
Discussion of Prison Populations

The most recent federal investigation of literacy in prisons is the 1992 study *Literacy Behind Prison Walls – Profiles of the Prison Population from the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Considering the drastic increase in the prison population during the past fourteen years, this data is certainly dated; the results of a more recent study, the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (with its component on prison populations) were expected to be released in March

2006 yet are still unavailable to the public aside from a short fact sheet (NAAL website). As a caveat, there are indeed some problems in comparing the literacy ability of a small number of inmates involved with the remnants of the penal press to the larger prison population. Still, my intent here is to show the larger literacy landscape of our prison population as a way of both contextualizing my own study and highlighting some of the problems in prison literacy education.

The 1992 study is one of the few moments where literacy skills within prison populations were investigated on a wide scale. The National Adult Literacy Survey was in response to a Congressional call for clarity in 1988 concerning the literacy skills of the American adult population as a whole. In hindsight, the national goal set under President Bush in 1990 that was a partial catalyst of the National Adult Literacy Survey seems a bit premature: “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (xv); prisoners, although deprived of rights such as voting, were included in this appeal.

The 1991 National Adult Literacy Act offered a broad conception of literacy that went beyond merely referring to skills: “...an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential” (*Literacy Beyond Prison Walls*, 5). Such a definition offers a broader concept than whether or not an individual is simply “literate” or “illiterate” – a concept that seems in line with recent academic studies of literacy – and accounts for the complexity of literacy and the range of solutions needed to

address literacy deficiencies.²⁶ The prison-focused part of the NALS study, based on interviews and scored responses by 1,150 randomly selected inmates in eighty randomly selected federal and state prisons, was aimed at describing literacy skills and levels among inmates in order “to inform policy debates, set program objectives, and reflect on our society’s resources and needs” (xvi). These findings were compared to the NALS findings of the household population and discussed “the relationship between literacy skills and the background characteristics and prison experiences of inmates as well as their literacy practices and self-perceptions” (xviii).²⁷ Three scales were developed to help determine literacy ability among survey participants, including those behind bars:

- Prose literacy – “the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction; for example, finding a piece of information in a newspaper, interpreting instructions from a warranty, inferring a theme from a poem, or contrasting views expressed in an editorial”
- Document literacy – “the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in materials that include job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs; for example, locating a particular intersection on a street map, using a schedule to choose the appropriate bus, or entering information on an application form”
- Quantitative literacy – “the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials; for example, balancing a checkbook, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest from a loan or advertisement” (3-4)

All participants in the National Adult Literacy Survey, including the inmates that participated, were given a score of 1 to 500 in each of these three areas that correlated to a degree of proficiency. Each scale was divided into five levels representing the “shifts in literacy skills and strategies required to perform increasingly complex tasks” (9).

²⁶ The study notes that while background questionnaires and other materials were available in Spanish, the goal of the report was to provide information about literacy in the English language and does not capture “the literacy resources and abilities that respondents may possess in languages other than English” (12).

²⁷ “Household Population” is defined in Appendix D of *Literacy Behind Walls* as “adults aged 16 and older who participated in the national household survey and state surveys” (151).

The demographic composition, educational attainment, and literacy ability differed significantly between the prison population – male, minority, young, less educated – and the general household population in the United States. In each of the above scales, inmate participants performed much lower than participants from the household population surveyed: “The proficiency scores of the total prison population are some 27 points lower than those of the general household population on the prose and document scales, and 35 points lower on the quantitative scale” (37). While there were, and still are, significantly more minority inmates than white inmates, the average score in all three scales for white inmates was “significantly higher than those of Black, and the proficiencies of Black inmates are significantly higher than those of Hispanic inmates” (38). All prisoners were shown to have fewer years of formal education on average than their household counterparts; furthermore, prisoners “are relatively disadvantaged in that they [typically] attain lower levels of education than their parents and their parents have attained less formal education than is typical of parents in the household population” (48). In terms of self-perceptions of literacy ability, “significantly fewer inmates than householders reported that they read or write English very well or do arithmetic very well” (86).

While background factors such as levels of formal education completed, whether or not English was primarily spoken in their homes, and levels of parental education are accounted for in this study, not much is really made of occupation or income levels either at the time of arrest or during the childhood years. Although two-thirds of the inmate participants reported that they were working in the month prior to their arrest and those inmates who reported earning over \$1,500 per month or more demonstrated higher prose and quantitative proficiencies than inmates who earned less than \$1,000 per month, few held professional jobs before their incarceration (46-

48). Yet no other questions within the study investigate the connections between economic status, educational opportunity, and criminality.

The NALS study of prisons does not posit a causal relationship between illiteracy and criminality, yet it seems as though the state and federal governments who run institutions such as prisons are unwilling to take responsibility in dealing with literacy education problems that plague their institutions. Wacquant's disturbing details concerning the lack of prison education programming that introduced this chapter show that literacy education behind bars is a low priority for prison administrators despite studies that connect inmate education with lower recidivism rates (Chappell; Steurer et al.; Vacca). If such a study was meant to help inform policy and programming or to act as a basis for prison literacy education reform measures, it looks like we have fallen short of the target. The Executive Summary of the prison-focused part of the National Adult Literacy Survey concludes with a perplexing statement: "Prisons should not be expected...to shoulder all of the responsibility" for the literacy education of inmates; "individuals, groups, organizations, schools, colleges, and businesses need to reach behind prison walls with efforts aimed at improving the literacy skills of inmates. It will take a comprehensive strategy, the purpose of which should be to prepare the whole person for succeeding in the world..." (xxiii).

Such a claim is incredibly hard to swallow, considering the litany of narratives written by teachers within prisons (many of whom work as volunteers while balancing full-time teaching or other work loads, academic or otherwise) with thin budgets and a wide range of student needs to attend to. In the fifteen years since this study, no "comprehensive strategy" has been proposed to tend to illiteracy problems within the prison system, and prison populations continue to

skyrocket. Consider Jonathon Kozol's comment, now over two decades old, concerning the American prison population:

\$6.6 billion yearly (estimate of 1983) is the minimal cost of prison maintenance for an estimated 260,000 inmates – out of a total state and federal prison population of about 440,000 – whose imprisonment has been directly linked to functional illiteracy. The prison population represents the single highest concentration of adult illiterates. While the criminal conviction of illiterate men and women cannot be identified exclusively with inability to read and write, the fact that 60 percent of prison inmates cannot read above grade school level surely provides some indication of one major reason for their criminal activity. (13-14)

Kozol's main target in his assault on illiteracy in the United States is not the connection between illiteracy and criminality, but the cycle of poverty and illiteracy and the societal failures that result: "Illiteracy among the poorest people in our population," Kozol argues, "is a logical consequence of the kind of schools we run, the cities that starve them, the demagogues who segregate them, and the wealthy people who escape them altogether to enroll their kids in better funded, up-to-date, and more proficient institutions" (89). Since this statement, little has been done to challenge conditions such as poverty that allow – not explicitly cause, but allow – for low literacy levels and crime as a path.

While my study is specifically about prisons and literacy and a particularly unique prison newspaper, I would be remiss in ignoring the fact that the problems facing inmate education, as reflected in the NALS study as well as in the narratives from inmate teachers in the following section, seem much like the problems that face public schools in economically-challenged urban areas. Although the National Adult Literacy Survey notes that "having advanced literacy skills does not necessarily guarantee individual opportunities" (*Adult Literacy in America*, xix), and although more recent scholars such as Stuckey have shown that the immediate causal connections between literacy skills and social mobility are speculative at best, NALS documents

show that literacy skills have a particular connection to financial stability. It is clear that one of the most certain ways to *not* have a sense of financial stability is to lack higher-level literacy skills: “Nearly half (41 to 44 percent) of all adults in the lowest level on each literacy scale [in the national survey] were living in poverty, compared with only 4 to 8 percent of those in the two highest proficiency levels” (*Adult Literacy in America*, xviii). These same adults were more likely to report receiving food stamps or interest from a savings account, and only slightly more than half took part in any voting.

The NALS, and specifically its subsection on prison populations, is indeed a rich source of data on literacy ability in the United States. But the lack of programming of any consequence at the state and federal level as a result of this national survey to address illiteracy on a wide scale – especially the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and crime – is problematic. To expect those outside of prison to help “shoulder the responsibility” of improving literacy among inmate populations, especially considering the extreme challenges of inmate education, seems to be a bit of a cop-out on behalf of the forces that create and sustain the prison system. In the next chapter, we will see *Angolite* writers profile inmates who have improved the quality of their lives behind bars through the few educational programs that existed at LSP during the 1970s and 1980s. These same writers also argue for more sustained inmate-educational programming. On our side of the prison walls, we say that we would like to teach better, to have inmate-students learn to read and write more effectively so that they might re-enter society with skills to help them better navigate life’s print and media based challenges. But we can’t afford it, nor will we try.

“Stories from the Inside”:
Some Discussions of Inmate Education by Inmate Educators

While my own study is not explicitly focused on inmate literacy education practices, the dire need for literacy education initiatives within prisons as noted in the previous section offers a

backdrop to both the penal press as a whole as well as *The Angolite* itself. Howard S.

Davidson's preface to *Schooling in a "Total Institution": Critical Perspectives on Education* offers a harrowing description of the difficulties that come with teaching and learning within prison environments:

Schooling in prison is stormy. I have never known it to be otherwise. Happenstance accounts for how most people find themselves teaching in prison. Frustration with doing more than occupying prisoners' time or the ever-present threat of cutbacks keeps teachers looking elsewhere for job opportunities. Student turnover is high for a myriad of reasons...Schooling in prison operates in isolation from the forces that impede radical change in public education. There are no teacher's unions or associations able to defend working conditions. Curricula change is not subject to intense debates among competing interests. There are no school boards prepared to fight for prison schools...I have attended meetings where we were told without previous notice that at the end of the term (i.e., in a few months) the prison school would close; later the decision would be reversed. This experience is by no means unique. (xv)

Davidson's frustration is shared to varying degrees by all the contributors to his important volume, one of the few collections that incorporates critical pedagogy with prison-based teaching and learning. While publications such as *Journal of Correctional Education* and others offer discussions of studies that, for example, connect lowered recidivism to correctional education and while even journals such as *College Composition and Communication* occasionally feature articles that discuss teaching behind bars, much of what actually happens in prison and education is somewhat hidden – a theme that resonates with the passages from Davis and Wilson that introduce this chapter. This absence, although national in scope, goes hand in hand with Carleton's comparison of the southern penitentiary to the autonomous city-state; as long as citizens don't have to deal with the prison and if the prison can economically support itself without draining too many tax dollars, then all is well. For example, in 1994 a provision

was added to the Omnibus Crime Bill that denied inmates access to Pell Grant funding; postsecondary educational programs were seen as wasted on those who were behind bars, and many universities and colleges were forced to cut or drastically reduce their contributions to inmate education at all levels (Welsh 154). Yet this removal of federal funds seems, in retrospect, more of a politically than economically motivated action, as less than one percent of the total Pell Grant pool actually went to inmates in the first place (Worth 5). Davidson offers a scathing account of the challenges that impede inmate educational reforms:

...the critics are the antieducational bureaucrat, the right-wing talk show host, the prison guard, and the conservative politician: those who think schooling prisoners is ‘coddling inmates’; or, even worse, rewarding them with educational opportunities that are increasingly unavailable to law-abiding citizens. The prison educator is almost always fearful that conditions can turn against him or her. (xiv)

Such fears seem right in line with the “just desserts” philosophy of punishment that characterizes recent decades. Edgar R. Haulard, a warden within the Louisiana state penal system, offers the following statement in a recent article about the need for prisoner education: “As society is finding more and more tax dollars to build correctional facilities, the amount of educational dollars earmarked to educate the incarcerated seems to be less and less” (157).

There are other problems that impede inmate education as well. Overcrowding can be a serious constraint; so can a lack of basic materials such as textbooks or even pens and paper. Inmates, as seen in the National Adult Literacy Survey’s report on prison as well as in other studies, often have had difficult experiences with formal schooling and therefore have confidence issues and negative attitudes towards education. Shethar, who I will turn to momentarily as a key study in inmate literacy education, offers a list of constraints and day-to-day interruptions such as head-counts, lock-downs, and inmate hearings and meetings that occur during scheduled classes. Peer pressure from inmates can discourage participation and academic

achievement (Haigler et al., xxi). Finally, there are budget problems, staff interference, administration policies, and even basic classroom behavior problems (eloquently dubbed by A. M. Thomas as “getting fucked with” [29]).

All contributors to Davidson’s volume noticed that “the prevalent discourse in prison education was out of touch with theoretical developments in sociology, history, and criminology” (xv). By extension, one could easily argue that such a discourse is fairly out of touch with developments in composition theory or literacy studies; literacy theorists have shown that people learn to write and read by immersing themselves within specific discourses. Yet skills sheets and workbooks that present reading and writing out of specific contexts are the core of the majority of prison educational programs. Such is the basis for Michael Collins’ assault on competency-based prison education programs that place complete, unyielding emphasis on functional literacy skills acquisition and ignore actual writing beyond workbooks and short sentences – a fault that is challenged in the next section of this chapter by scholar/inmate educators such as Kathy Boudin. As argued in “Shades of the Prison House: Adult Literacy and the Correctional Ethos,” such programs are usually broken down in easily measurable units for evaluation and are often focused on such pedagogical antiquaries as grammar workbooks and phonics: “Modularized curriculum formats tend to find an ideal haven in the prison setting given their emphasis on prescriptive guidelines and orderly, sequentialized patterns” (50). More importantly, Collins shows how such competency-based programs provide easy surveillance for individual prison-behavior. Instead of liberating the learner, literacy in this sense provides yet another shackle and chain.

Collins outlines three typical models of prison-literacy programs: the medical model, the opportunities model, and the cognitive deficiency model. In the medical model, “the prisoner-

student is diagnosed as a mental patient requiring treatment...[L]iteracy training is viewed as a means to bring about a reduction in the rate of recidivism by reshaping prisoners for rehabilitation” (51). Rigidly functionalist in design, the medical model is supported mainly by pre-tests and post-tests “which require the student to circle or underline the answer, fill in the blanks, or provide short written answers predefined by tightly set parameters...Emphasis is placed on the ability to read and respond to short written statements rather than on writing for free expression” (51); in short, such a practice acts a normalizing agent. Collins interrogates the Adult Performance Level (APL) curriculum initiative as an example of the medical model that places a prime emphasis on the acquisition of “functional” literacy skills. It is easy to see why such an approach is amenable to prison staff members and wardens: because goals are rigidly pre-programmed into the system, teachers are redefined as “managers” or “facilitators”; texts can be closely controlled by authority figures; inmates can be trained for the lowest level skills required by businesses who see the penal population as an untapped workforce – a postmodern extension of the old penal lease system.

The opportunities model, while somewhat less focused on behavior maintenance and decreased recidivism, is “envisaged as keeping prisoners ‘meaningfully busy’” (53) while they serve their respective sentences. Furthermore, the opportunities model is directly linked to job-skill based forms of literacy, despite the fact that “opportunities” as a concept in this sense is obviously short-sighted: “Educators and prisoners alike are aware of the economic circumstances that determine this reality,” (54) and employment possibilities for inmates post-release are only minimally connected with reading and writing. The status of being a former inmate – marked on numerous job applications, background checks, etc – is a stain that doesn’t wash off easily when it comes to employment. “In these regards,” Collins argues, “the rationale for the opportunities

model is flawed...The opportunities model places a mediator (prospects for a good job) between treatment of the individual (prison schooling) and the adoption of attitudes which define ‘good citizenship’” (53-54). Stephen J. Steuer’s “Historical Development of a Model for Correctional Education and Literacy,” is noble in that it is grounded in a concept of literacy that goes beyond traditional concerns of simply reading and writing, – “teachers need to be prepared to create more sophisticated methods of instruction in order to help students become successful citizens, parents and community members when they leave the correctional institutions” (51). Yet it concludes by reinforcing that job skills and post-release employment should be the primary goal of prison education. Although such an approach to literacy learning might have the best of intentions, with connections between inmates and employment and democracy, the link between literacy and employment after release is far from certain; there are simply too many other factors to consider aside from one’s education or literacy ability.

Finally, the cognitive deficiency model “assumes that shortcomings in the prisoner’s ways of knowing and acting are associated with the perpetration of misdeeds that harm others” (54). Such a practice ties education with moral development; in the specific case of the recent years of Louisiana State Penitentiary, “moral rehabilitation” – with direct connections to Christianity – is the prime directive of Warden Cain’s approach to prisoner management.²⁸ Collins charges that the notion that “the wages of sin are imprisonment, and that through education to eradicate character deficiencies there is a way to redemption” (54) is fairly loaded with themes of religious fundamentalism. Furthermore, in light of Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget, Collins argues that the conditions experienced by individuals, rather than individual deficiencies, “constitute the ultimately relevant source of retardation in cognitive and, hence, moral development” (54). Therefore, as opposed to any of these models where literacy is

²⁸ See Shere for one account of moral rehabilitation programming at LSP.

dictated by a top-down enforcement strategy, “only by transforming prisons into democratic settings where prisoners have authority over significant aspects of administration through community decision making is it possible to create conditions for cognitive moral development” (54-55). But how does that moral development remain intact upon release? While I support inmate education programs, especially those described by Shafer and Shethar that ask inmates to draw upon the world of the prison as a basis for increased awareness and understanding, it seems as though most prison education programs only address “basic skills” – as if crime can be solved by “fixing” individual prisoners instead of addressing the deeper socio-economic problems that lead people to commit crimes.

While the cognitive deficiency model isn’t directly cited, Canadian researcher Randall Wright critiques the current state of prison education – with its direct connections between literacy and physical rewards, in his “What the Students are Saying: Literacy as Dwelling” (2001). Wright is mainly concerned with how “the student’s performance in literacy programs has become closely tied to pay scales, release dates, prison transfers, and various other negative and positive sanctions” (84). Wright argues against such behaviorist notions where “inmates are often positioned...as ‘absent others’ – full of deficits and needs and lacking in rationality...[T]hey often become transparent, invisible and de-ontologized – they have no place or ground” (84). While he understands that job-skills and preparation for post-release work are crucial, Wright contends that such a focus should not be at the center of prison-based education. His data, drawn from prisoner-student journal writings, reflected that inmates “conceived of literacy as a journey” (86). Drawing upon Heidegger’s essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Wright’s concept of literacy in this situation is a space that prisoners can enter and maintain to varying degrees where they are free: “Literacy provides students with shelter, time to spare

themselves and others, room for installing themselves and admitting the world, and safe passage. Literacy bonds the student and the world” (88). When literacy is only discussed in prison – or in public schools, or universities – as goals, objectives, skills, and methods, we lose sight of what literacy actually might mean for the inmate-learners themselves. Wright, a frequent contributor to *Journal of Correctional Education*, shows how literacy practices are meaningful to inmates in providing an alternative to previous thinking about human relationships and an understanding of the self – a consideration that is far from the world of standardized tests.

All of the claims that Collins outlines and critiques about literacy programs and incarceration – that they improve morality and self-esteem, that they increase chances for post-release employment, that they allow for a fuller participation in democracy – are considered in one of the most-widely cited case studies of prison and literacy, Alissa Shethar’s “Literacy and ‘Empowerment?’ A Case Study Behind Bars.” Shethar’s study explores “if there was any sense in which literacy tutoring could lead to meaningful change for participants, given that the social position of the learner was so fixed” (357). Such a search questions current and commonly held prescriptions for literacy – prescriptions that are quite similar to those traced by Collins. In line with Collins’ call for literacy training that is collaboratively designed and maintained with inmate input, Shethar argues that dramatic changes in inmate writing are most affected by “the social relationships in which his writing plays an instrumental and constitutive role” (358). Grounded in both Freire’s work and Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones,” a framework that is the basis for my next chapter, her argument resonates with the work of the New Literacy Studies in that she pays close attention to the specific context of her participant, understands that literacy can be practiced in a wide range of ways, and clarifies how literacy is always patterned by power relationships.

Perhaps one of the most interesting moments in Shethar's article is where she aligns the regimented nature of texts and text circulation in the prison environment – specifically, in her case, a California State facility during the early 1990's – with the large amount of writing that she documents taking place in the penitentiary. While inmates at her site of study may only check out one book at a time from the prison library (books, like any other objects, are subject to confiscation at any time) and while all inmate mail is highly monitored, the inmates she observes “often amass huge folders of poetry, periodicals, and writings, trade books for services, and large collections of books. People in jail use writing in various ways, requesting services, writing letters, filling their own motions...Writing is commissioned by those who cannot write as well as they would like...” (360). Yet as she notes through her study of one 23 year old Mexican-American inmate writer, “All the writing that inmate writers do is a coming to terms with the authoritarian discourses and relations within which they write” (360). As I noted in Chapter Two and as we will see in Chapters Four and Five, the same can be said for writers involved with *The Angolite*.

Shethar notes the variety of roles that Santiago, the focus of her article, plays in both his daily life and in his writing. She traces his difficulty in writing in English, especially in particularly formal situations: “He said he sometimes ‘talked like a lawyer’ and that made him feel proud and different; yet when he actually talked with his own lawyer, he felt ill at ease” (364). Such feelings are deeply connected with differences in power between inmate and legal officials and the language that both reflects and shapes such power relations. Shethar argues that while Donald Bartholomae might call such a struggle “interlanguage at the discourse level – a writer trying to approximate a level of formality that he or she does not yet control” (365), Santiago's writings are instead a sign of his “changing position in a discourse...where [he]

brings a different set of relationships to bear” (365). To challenge this situation, Shethar asked her student to write in situations where he was the expert and where he could teach her something about the prison and his own life there; at times, he wrote in Spanish, a language that he had far more control over than his teacher. “Through conflicts across cultural difference and through a struggle between us concerning the framework and ownership of knowledge,” Shethar argues, “Santiago was repositioning himself in this relationship [between teacher and student], bringing outside community relations to bear in new ways” (366). His writing became an opportunity “that reorganized social relations around him” (367).

Shethar is not foolish enough to romanticize Santiago’s situation: “literacy programs do not change an economic system that requires unemployment and a working class and that the ability to read does not change a social structure that reinforces inequalities...the changes in [Santiago’s] reading and writing are dwarfed by the overwhelming sameness in his position” (368). But the changes in his position as a learning subject can, and did, act as seeds for critical consciousness – a transformation of how an inmate sees himself in relation to the world of the prison. Much of the writing that Shethar discusses in this study “involved a negotiation of identity, as he successfully represented himself and his experiences in writing” (368). Instead of alluding to increased job skills or salvation or morality, Santiago writes that, “the process of learning motivates my hunger to restore my life as a knowledgeable individual” (370). Because Shethar was willing to give up some of her sanctioned authority as a teacher, Santiago became involved – as Freire would note – in reading “the word and the world.”

While discussions of inmate education, as I noted earlier, are typically framed by connections between literacy education and recidivism, few studies connect inmate writing to social relationships; furthermore, very few studies can be found in rhetoric and composition

journals where such talk of writing, identity, and the social implications of writing and reading are quite popular. Gregory Shafer begins his narrative (published in *English Journal*) about the four months he spent teaching at a women's correctional facility with a lament about conditions and difficulties noted by other prison teachers earlier in this chapter. His main focus is to explain how he designed an introductory composition course that "would make connections with what each writer was experiencing as she grappled with prison life and family separation" (76). Grounded in Giroux's understanding of how pedagogy should help students gain a critical consciousness that will allow them to use writing to make sense of their own problems and worlds as well as Marcia Dickson's use of ethnography in writing classrooms in a way that combines personal and academic voices and interests, Shafer modifies a prison-mandated syllabus to allow for the passions and frustrations that were a daily part of his students' lives within the prison system and "to make the class responsive to these students and the problems they were grappling to solve" (77). Like Shethar, Shafer asks his student/research participants to draw upon their own experiences in prison as generative writing themes. While early drafts "read more like testimonials" than essays, their urgency and desperation showed a power that could be drawn upon within the classroom setting: "Why do I want to write? After twenty years of being incarcerated for killing an abusive husband, I don't have much belief in the system but I do believe in myself, and it's that part of me that I am writing to. I need to learn about myself before I get out" (76). Again, the focus here is how literacy works to transform how an inmate sees himself or herself in relation to context.

While the majority of the assignments in his course have an expressionist base – Shafer cites Peter Elbow as a key influence on his understanding of audience and draft revision – Shafer designs a syllabus that asks the students to draw upon their own experiences and questions as a

way to develop towards writing analytical prose.²⁹ A causal argument, a description, and a research paper are connected “as part of a chapter in a longer story of their lives and the hopes they had for the future” (77). He understands his students quite well, especially in terms of how their language and sentence patterns were, at times, quite different from traditional college writing students. Citing Geneva Smitherman, he knows that strict – and often unexplained – requirements for Standard English often result in the silencing of minority and disaffected students. While his students “were providing a wrenching glimpse of their plights through the language that they knew and used” (79), even with double-negatives and agreement problems, he and his students negotiated the role of language in different situations – how “these essays, despite their college audience, would benefit from the inclusion of the writer’s dialects” (79). This is not to say that Shafer asks us to ignore or work against Standard English, but rather to understand – and help students to understand – how the success or failure of language is based on context and, again, the social relationship between writers and audiences. He asks students “to consider the most effective way to bring authenticity to their experiences while also respecting the expectations of the academy” (80). Shafer’s students draw upon their experiences as a way to both develop their writing skills and to use literacy to take control of their lives.

Like Shethar and Shafer, Kathy Boudin’s writings about education behind bars are based upon the idea of transformation, although she does not use this term explicitly. “For adults” Boudin argues, “the ability to read and write critically is not separate from the ability to take some control over their own lives. This includes handling day-to-day affairs as well as being

²⁹ In light of the long-standing debate over the relevance of personal, expressivist-based writing in the first-year writing classroom, it might be useful to point out here that Shafer uses personal, memory, and experience oriented writing as a way of getting his students to begin composing and, eventually, sharing drafts with classmates. These drafts are used to help students work towards more argumentative work, yet they are crucial in helping his students begin talking about both their shared experiences and their own written work. Expressivist oriented writing, as reflected in Shafer’s work, seems particularly useful for the prison classroom.

able to imagine and develop a wider range of choices” (141). I bring up Boudin here not only because of her clear writing style and obvious dedication to inmate education but also because, unlike most scholars in inmate-education, Boudin is serving time in a New York State maximum-security facility. She is involved with a number of teaching and research projects within her facility and has even earned a master’s degree while behind bars; “I was aware of the many issues that inmates intensely discussed outside of the classroom. In contrast, I saw the passivity that they brought to the literacy workbooks and their feelings of embarrassment and lack of self-esteem within the classroom” (141). Boudin then narrates how she developed a problem-posing methodology for a low-level reading and writing class based in Freire’s emancipatory pedagogy, one that “would tap into their energy...and at the same time provide a context for reflection, analysis, and solving problems they experienced” (141). This pedagogical stance is radically different from the individualized, decontextualized, workbook-driven model that is often a part of prison literacy-education programs.

Part of Boudin’s essay is drawn from a series of activities in the Adult Basic Education class that she leads. Because of her students’ strong reaction to a documentary about AIDS in prisons, Boudin developed a curriculum unit that would incorporate their interest in such a topic; in 1995, 20% of the women entering New York State prisons were HIV positive. While Boudin did use traditional worksheets to help build vocabulary skills, the words and phrases were taken from the documentary and their own discussions of the virus, such as “antibody” and “immune system”: “Reading lessons took place around materials that women brought into class: scientific pamphlets, newspaper articles, materials from AIDS organizations with life histories from people with AIDS” (142). Free writing prompts were designed based on student conversations about the texts and became a base for developing class activities on sentence structure. While the

“expectations of the academy” as Shafer notes in his own teaching narrative were part of Boudin’s lesson plans, the topic and basic elements were drawn from the students’ own concerns. The class then developed a play about the issues they had learned as well as a handbook to be distributed to incoming inmates that spoke to fears and concerns about HIV in prisons.

The AIDS unit is just one of the topics that Boudin describes as a generative theme, established by the students working in collaboration with their instructor. Instead of a situation where the teacher acts as the sole bearer of knowledge for the student-recipients, students define issues for reflection and discussion, participate through dialogue and peer instruction, and contribute to both the class materials (through their own writing or by bringing texts that they find on their own to class meetings) and the larger discussion. Boudin argues how a problem-posing model is much better suited for her students than what is typically offered:

Writing was a central part of the literacy experience in the critical thinking units. Yet writing is not a regular part of the ABE [Adult Basic Education] curriculum except for rudimentary functional tasks such as filling in blanks or writing sentences following grammar instructions. This follows the widely accepted bottom-up model of literacy: that ABE learners must first develop the “lower-order skills” of spelling and grammar... Yet many adults are eager to write. (143)

When students such as Boudin’s (or Shethar’s, or Shafer’s) use writing to articulate their own concerns, the way they see themselves changes radically; they directly experience the power of their literacy development and become active learners and thinkers. I am not arguing that such a transformation takes place overnight or that literacy can work as some sort of lexical magic. Each of these scholar-teachers takes note of the long, hard work that their students are involved in. Still, these teachers and the students that they work with see literacy as a way to tell their

own stories, to take part in larger conversations, to improve the quality of their lives in a place designed for punishment and complete removal and control.

But, unfortunately, the teaching practices expressed within this article and others like it reflect a pedagogy that seems rare within the penal system. We have already established the day-to-day difficulties of teaching and learning within prisons. Yet here, in these discussions, we can find a pedagogical framework that allows students to develop their writing by writing about their own lives and concerns while learning about such elements as audience and even grammar. While the purposes of the writing in inmate classrooms and the writing that is seen in inmate news publications such as *The Angolite* are quite different, they both draw upon generative themes taken from within the prison world and the learners' own day-to-day concerns that are crucially important to each group of writers. Instead of having the prison discussed and described by outsiders, both *Angolite* writers and inmate-students who are part of liberatory literacy programs take the opportunity to have their own say in the matter. While their power is certainly limited by the very space that contains them as inmates, perhaps simply the act of writing about their world (and, in the case of *The Angolite* or even the pamphlet that Boudin's students composed, publishing texts from their own point of view) is a way of resisting the totalizing control of the penitentiary.

The pedagogical stances that I highlighted in the latter half of this section are attuned to recent developments in literacy theory that pay close attention to context and power relationships within literacy practices. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss some of the foundations of literacy studies in order to further show why an examination of *The Angolite* is important. I then turn to some examples of literacy-oriented scholarship that is focused on prison populations. Again, as Wacquant shows, there are very few extended studies of the rapidly growing prison

population, which is perhaps the most important reason why studies such as mine and the ones I note within this chapter are crucial in both a scholarly and political sense.

“It’s in the way that you use it...” –
Some Foundations of Literacy Studies
and Recent Explorations of Literacy and the Inmate World

One might argue that while the field of literacy studies is as old as reading and writing itself, recent conceptions of literacy began with the so-called “literacy crisis” of the 1970s and 1980s. Viewed in retrospect, popular media accounts published during this period such as the now infamous 1975 *Newsweek* article “Why Johnny Can’t Read” reflect our impending national obsession with the connection between literacy and standardized test scores. When literacy is discussed outside the circles of progressive educators, literacy theorists, and scholars in the fields of rhetoric and composition, it seems to be well anchored to the concept of literacy as only a school-sanctioned activity focused on reading and writing, and, specifically, the assessment of the activities as skills to be learned. As Cushman and others have noted, the singular depiction of literacy – “the straightforward encoding and decoding of texts...a single thing, measurable through a standardized test...the reading of one kind of text and not another” (Cushman, et al. 2) seems to hold the most weight within American culture. Obviously, reading and writing take place in a number of contexts – including the prison, despite cultural stereotypes of the contemporary inmate. As noted by James Paul Gee, the focus of literacy studies “should not be language, or literacy, but *social practices*” (525, italics original). It is not simply reading or writing that is paramount, but rather how such practices determine, in light of our concerns here, *insiders* and *outsiders*. Gee defines discourses as “ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures,

glances, body positions, and clothes.” (526). In short, a discourse “is sort of an identity kit” (526).

Barton and Hamilton provide a succinct explanation of such an approach to literacy that radically departs from traditional, “autonomous” viewpoints:

Literacy is primarily something that people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned and it does not just reside on paper, captured as text to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (3)

Gee provides the link between “literacy” and “discourse/s.” As he argues in “What is Literacy?”, “Discourses are inherently ‘ideological.’ They crucially involve a set of values and viewpoints in terms of which one must speak and act, at least while being in the discourse; otherwise one doesn’t count as being in it” (538). Therefore, “literacy,” among the range of definitions we attach to it, is inherently *social*; it is a method of identification and membership status. As more recent scholars such as J. Elspeth Stuckey have noted, literacy can be violent, divisive, controlling; while we might always position literacy as “emancipatory” (and, at times, most prison writers understandably tend to perpetuate this notion), literacy – as a social device – separates the center from the margins, the insiders from the outsiders.

So, what might all this mean for prison writers and, specifically, *Angolite* staff members? Considering this ideological position of prisoners – along with the massive growth of the “prison industry” in the United States and the birth of the “supermax” as well as the work of Foucault and Sloop – prisoners are *only* seen as prisoners. As Sloop notes toward the end of his discussion of “just desserts” penology, “Male African-American prisoners (and, to a degree, other nonwhite male prisoners) are constrained by their past representations” (159). Yet *Angolite* writers take on the identity of journalists, historians, critics, photographers, and lawyers; by

learning and practicing these roles, they practice literacy in a radically different way than what is usually associated with the faceless, nameless millions of Americans living under surveillance as part of the prison-industrial complex.³⁰ By writing in genres that are recognizable to mainstream readers, these outsiders attempt to enter discourses that are normally as sealed and closed as the prison itself.³¹ In light of Barton and Hamilton and others, an issue of *The Angolite* is essentially an interaction between writers and readers (both inside and outside the boundaries of the penitentiary) who collaboratively re-assess the cultural conception of prison. Throughout my discussion of *The Angolite*, the penal press in general, and literacy within prisons, I invoke contemporary literacy theory and the ways that my analyses contribute to literacy studies.

Beverly Moss offers a succinct summary of the major chronological shifts in scholarly definitions of literacy as well as some of the corresponding changes in the field of literacy studies:

In attempts to define literacy, the debate has progressed from a focus on the dichotomy between orality and literacy (Goody and Watt, 1963; Olson 1977; Ong 1982), which associated higher order cognitive abilities with literacy and cognitive deficiencies with orality, to a discussion that links literacy to a complex web or network of social practices (Heath, 1983; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Scribner and Cole, 1981). There is still much discussion and disagreement on definitions of literacy, but that discussion has, for the most part, moved away from the “great divide” theories to a need to understand more about how literacy is learned and used in communities and institutions outside the mainstream. (2-3)

³⁰ Schlosser’s definition of this concept is scathing: “a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need...it is a confluence of special interests that has given prison construction in the United States a seemingly unstoppable momentum. It is composed of politicians, both liberal and conservative, who have used the fear of crime to gain votes; impoverished rural areas where prisons have become a cornerstone of economic development; private companies that regard the roughly \$35 billion spent each year on corrections not as a burden on American taxpayers but as a lucrative market; and government officials whose fiefdoms have expanded along with the inmate population” (54).

³¹ Granted, one could argue that Angola is quite the “open” institution, considering such practices as tours, craft fairs, the Angola Prison Rodeo, documentary filmmakers, volunteers from church groups, and the Angola-based musical groups that often perform outside the prison. However, as noted by Melissa Schrift, whose work is discussed later, “the prison is a space that defines itself by its ability to conceal” (331).

The critical crossroads where some of the most prominent figures in recent literacy studies meet – a list that would include, in no particular order, bell hooks, Mike Rose, Shirley Brice Heath, Brian Street, and Ellen Cushman – is marked by their shared concern that the rather limited public understanding of literacy fails to consider important contextual factors such as race, class, and gender. “Literacy,” as argued by Moss, “cannot be defined without examining it in the social contexts in which it occurs along with the social practices that surround it” (3). One of the major concerns in recent literacy studies involves documenting and unpacking how groups use literacy to enact and sustain their identity – a question that clearly connects with my own exploration of *The Angolite*.

Since the publication of Shirley Brice Heath’s ethnographic-based study, *Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, scholars have taken the initiative to document the ways that people use reading and writing in their everyday lives. Heath was interested in comparing everyday language use with language expectations that exist in formal school settings. Her work, in the wake of school de-segregation, examined three communities within a moderately sized city in the Southeast United States. Heath had been invited to a black community in the area (called “Trackton” in her study) because residents were concerned that their children were not doing well in school and “felt that there was little meaningful communication going on between [white] teachers and their children in the classroom” (107); teachers, on the other hand, felt that Trackton students could not or would not respond to even simple questions. Heath spent ten years collecting data that allowed her to compare how written and spoken language was used in the home environments of members of these three distinct communities. Among her findings, she reported how the act of questioning differed greatly between the parent-child relations of Trackton residents and the two white

communities that are part of her inquiry. While her white participants (particularly those middle-class participants, labeled in the study as “Townpeople”) used questions as a method of training children and to enact verbal response, Trackton adult residents “did not attempt to engage children as conversational partners until they were seen as realistic sources of information and competent partners in talk” (114). Although Trackton students were often labeled as “slow” or “incompetent” by their white teachers, the students’ tendency to answer in more than single words and phrases was hardly a failure but rather a manifestation of how these children were trained in their home community. The behavioral patterns of Trackton children that were practiced and reinforced at home did not transfer successfully to de-segregated classrooms where their white teachers had radically different expectations for student-teacher conversational exchanges.

But the problems that Trackton children were facing in school went beyond mere question-answer miscommunications. The home activities of “Townpeople” children were well matched with the activities that typically took place in school: “From their baby books to their guide books for participation in league soccer, the townspeople’s children have been motivated towards seeing their current activities as relating to their future achievements” (367). This was not the case for Trackton or Roadville (a white-working class community that was part of Heath’s study). The children of the white townspeople was already predetermined to succeed in school; talking about texts and understanding the nature of teacher-posed questions were habits that were instilled in their early lives. Heath sympathetically shows that Trackton and Roadville children are certainly literate via her descriptions of literacy in religious events, everyday play activities, problem solving, and socializing. However, the literacy of Roadville and Trackton children clashes with literacy expectations in mainstream school environments; Roadville

children, for example were “given few occasions for extended narratives, imaginative flights of establishing new contexts...Thus their readiness for school is a limited readiness – and not a preparedness for the types of task necessary for higher-level school work” (352). One of the merits of *Ways With Words* is that it offers an early argument for multiple literacies – how different communities produce different expectations and implicit rules for communicating – and shows that what is often seen by an outsider perspective as a communicative failure can be clarified by an understanding of larger contextual issues such as class and race.

While Heath’s findings that I have mentioned seem far from the world of prisons and prison newspapers, Heath’s contribution of the concept of *literacy events* is quite important to both literacy studies in general and my specific investigation of *The Angolite*. Literacy events are “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretative processes” (93). There is usually a written text that is central to an activity, and the situation might even involve verbal talk concerning the text or its functions or uses. Literacy events are not at all limited to just formal school situations; they can range from following the directions for a recipe to routine school-oriented events such as answering an essay question on a test. Certainly, the collaborative writing, editing, design, and publication of an inmate newspaper is a literacy event (or, perhaps more clearly, a series of multiple literacy events) that holds an immense amount of value for inmate writers. Observing different literacy events makes it clear that literacy is not the same in all contexts and expands our lens beyond the classroom and into the worlds of everyday people who use reading and writing for a variety of reasons. Since Heath, there have been numerous studies both in the United States and abroad that detail, describe, and analyze how communities use literacy. On our own shores, Beverly Moss’ edited collection *Literacy Across Communities*, Ellen Cushman’s *The Struggle and The*

Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community, and Andrea Fishman's *Amish Literacy: How and What it Means* are interesting examples of how scholars have taken a close look at how communities that are somewhat off the mainstream radar understand and perform literacy. What connects these recent explorations of literacy is the understanding that literacy is a social practice "situated" within a specific context – an approach that drastically contrasts the traditional view of literacy as "simply a technical and neutral skill" (Street, "What's New..." 77).

Brian Street expands the notion of literacy events to a broader concept of literacy practices. Literacy practices incorporate literacy events but also attempt to take account for something more amorphous than just the act itself, "pitched at a higher level of abstraction and referring to both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and/or writing" (*Literacy*, 12). As summarized by Barton and Hamilton, literacy practices involve "values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships...Practices are shaped by social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts, prescribing who may produce and have access to them" (7-8). So, while literacy events are observable, practices are not. However, Street and other scholars involved with the New Literacy Studies see literacy practices as the basic unit for literacy research; as scholars, we observe events and analyze texts to learn about practices. Street argues that, "It is not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced afterward" (Street, "What's New..." 78). Instead, literacy (or, rather, literacies) is based in social relationships from the outset. The approach offered in New Literacy Studies, among other goals, attempts to broaden the traditional understanding of literacy and, in terms of practice, to recognize how these more "hidden" literacies might be incorporated into and built upon in school environments. While the inmate-teacher/scholars that I noted in the previous section do not explicitly acknowledge literacy studies as a foundation for their own

classroom practices, it seems clear that Boudin, Shethar, and Shafer attempt to make their teaching and tutoring draw upon, rather than completely negate, the expertise that their respective students already have.

Barton and Hamilton, in their detailed account of local and historical literacy practices (focusing on “vernacular literacies” that are often overlooked) in Lancaster, England, offer a list that can be read as basic tenets for the New Literacy Studies:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible, and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historical situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (7)

In these tenets, it is clear that localized literacy practices – especially practices that take place outside of sanctioned environments such as schools – are legitimate sites for research. Studies such as these show how people use various literacies in their daily lives and how literacy is used to make and shape social relationships. This theoretical stance clearly grounds my own study at a number of levels. While inmates in the United States generally have extremely low levels of traditional reading and writing skills – as seen in the prison component of the National Adult Literacy Survey – *The Angolite* is a detailed, complex body of texts that shows a group of long-term inmates at one of the oldest and most historically troubled American prisons as highly articulate and able to argue for inmate needs. Furthermore, because these men are disconnected from the larger world both physically and ideologically, *Angolite* staffers use writing as a way to not only form connections with other inmates (in such ways as providing information about local

and national prison issues or even simple accounts of Angola-oriented activities) but also to attempt to connect with readers outside of the prison. Staff members value their positions on *The Angolite* because the publication provides them a way to improve the quality of their lives behind bars and be recognized as something other than simply another inmate serving hard time.

However, there have been recent critiques of situated literacy studies. Perhaps one of the most popular is offered by Elspeth Stuckey in *The Violence of Literacy*. Stuckey's argument is targeted at both researchers such as the aforementioned Heath and Street (who "appear ignorant of the ideological frameworks in which they work" [22]) and the entire educational system in the United States. Like most recent literacy researchers, Stuckey wants educators to recognize the socio-political context in which English and writing classes are taught. However, unlike studies that focus on how a particular group uses literacy in everyday life, her work is a much broader indictment. Stuckey argues that the typical speculations about the importance of literacy are misguided at best "because the assumptions about the economic and social forces on which they are based on are faulty" (vii). Literacy, from her vantage point, does not lead to social change or the economic improvement of one's life; instead, literacy is "violent" in its deep and perpetual connections to an "entrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it" (vii). Literacy, or, rather, the literacy that is most valued in schools and judged by grades and advancement, is a sorting mechanism that allows the upper and middle classes to maintain economic power over others. The literacy standards imposed in schools do not only exclude a large segment of the population from participating in mainstream discourse but also mark this same demographic – the same demographic that Taylor focuses on in *Toxic Literacies* – as other, as powerless, as silenced. "Economic demarcation," Stuckey argues, "falls upon the lines of linguistic habits" (41).

While Stuckey's text is difficult to navigate, her assault resonates with issues commonly found within classrooms. Much of what happens in the traditional English classroom seems to have little relevance with the writing and reading that occurs outside of school systems. Stuckey does not, like many literacy scholars such as Street or Hull and Schultz argue, appeal for a deeper connection between literacy practices that occur inside and outside classrooms. Instead, she shows that literacy education in schools is, at its essence, a practice in conformity where the middle-class values implied within writing and reading acts enforced in school settings always wins. Stuckey argues that explorations in literacy practices are misguided: "Why, must we ask, do studies of language always result in solutions that are linguistic rather than economic?" (41). Instead, literacy scholars and educators should refocus their efforts, she implies, on economic systems that perpetuate inequality. Our task, she argues, is not to promote "greater literacy" but rather "greater humanity" (124).

Although I sympathize with her argument, I bring up Stuckey because of her attack on the belief that "literacy really made us human...[L]iteracy was never really this way, and it was wrong to think it was" (124). The transformative powers of literacy have been challenged since the earliest studies of Scribner and Cole (1981), who argued that literacy did not, in fact, improve cognition or drastically impact the intellectual capacity for human beings; instead, what matters most about literacy was understanding how groups used writing and reading in localized, specific ways. Even the transformative properties of literacy espoused by Paulo Freire – "the incessant struggle...to regain humanity" (33) – has been fairly dismissed in recent years. And as I noted already concerning the work of Denny Taylor, literacy is often used as a barrier rather than a bridge. Yet in the prison-based educational studies that I noted in the previous section as well as in the work of Anita Wilson and Eleanor Novek and Deborah Brandt, we see inmates who, like

Angolite writers, attempt to take some control over their worlds despite their lack of power within the prison system via constructions of language – via the act of writing. Despite all that these inmate writers face, they see reading and writing as small but important acts of participation, as a way to construct a different role that extends beyond the docile body of the inmate.

Brandt's *Literacy and American Lives* does not exclusively focus on the connections between literacy and incarceration; however, her analysis of Johnny Ames ("an inmate for more than 16 years in maximum and minimum security prisons in the Midwest" [57] from the late 1970's to the early 1990's) is worth noting not only for the popularity of her larger text but also her take on the possible connections between literacy and incarceration. While Brandt is certainly a key figure in literacy studies, she has critiqued the recent emphasis on localized, situated literacies that have become the standard since Heath's ethnographic work. In a recent exchange with Street, she admits the value of situated studies but argues for the recognition of how literacy often comes to local situations from larger and perhaps more distant forces: "Literacy practices" Brandt says, "are not typically invented by their practitioners. Nor are they independently chosen or sustained by them. Literacy in use more often than not serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out away from the individual scene" (Brandt and Clinton, 337). Brandt's concern with both local literacies and more distanced forces that affect localized practices is apparent in *Literacy in American Lives*.

Via her field-based interviews with 80 interview subjects from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds (all born between 1895 and 1985), *Literacy in American Lives* attempts to show how literacy functions as a resource – a "valuable – and volatile – property" (2).

“Inevitably,” Brandt argues, “pursuing literacy in the twentieth century entailed learning to respond to an unprecedented pace of change in the uses, forms, and standards of literacy” (2); such changes, as noted in her above exchange with Street, often begin in spaces quite distant from the local situations they affect. Her larger project is an analysis of what she calls “sponsors of literacy”; sponsors, according to Brandt, include “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). While sponsors “deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access,” the sponsored themselves can be either “oblivious to or innovative with this ideological burden” (20). Opportunities for literacy, therefore, involve relationships to economic structures – local or distant – that support chances for learning. Such an analytical framework helps to answer such questions as how regional economic and ideological issues and changes transform conditions for learning, how changes in literacy needs actually affect Americans within a certain historical and geographical moment, how literacy is passed from generation to generation in an almost evolutionary sense, and what “barriers and opportunities in social structures matter to literacy” (21).

Johnny Ames is introduced in her chapter titled, “Literacy and Illiteracy in Documentary America” via an exploration of how individuals understand and react to rising standards of literacy. While the literacy abilities of the other major case-study figure described within this chapter – a skilled union debater and verbal negotiator – are eclipsed by the development of written legal documents within union/corporate relations, Ames’s story is one of success; Ames “began a gradual project of self-rescue within the context of a modernizing prison. In synchronization with a series of legal rulings that expanded prisoner rights and access to legal knowledge, he left prison a literate man” (22) who “taught himself to read and write,”

“completed an associate’s degree as a paralegal technician,” “wrote an appeal that overturned his conviction” which led to his release, and “began a career as a legal-aid researcher and part-time counselor of youth offenders” (58). Like Wilbert Rideau, Malcolm X, or Jack Abbott, Ames’s narrative could be read as a Horatio Alger story – a man who could pull himself up “by his own bootstraps.”³²

And yet, such straps are buckled to more than just Ames’ own boots. This narrative is traced within a period of standardized contracts, rules, and rights. “As more political and economic processes were bound up with documents,” Brandt writes, “illiteracy grew more limiting and punishing” (48). Ames is shown to us as a figure caught within tides of changing power relations and representations. He is savvy enough – or, perhaps just lucky enough – to be caught within changes in inmate policies. Ames’ own story, while inspiring and certainly emblematic of American notions of individualized improvement, is less of note here than the forces within the legal and penal systems that surround his story. At the same time as Ames’ incarceration, the verdict of *Bound vs. Smith* upheld the 14th amendment for anyone – including prisoners – to have the right to both represent themselves in court and to have access to legal research facilities. Brandt cites prison historian James B. Jacobs’ description of the 1970’s as a period where courts at every level “scrutinized every aspect of the prison regime” and “issued injunctions and declaratory judgments affecting discipline, good time, living conditions, health care, censorship, restrictions on religion and speech, and access to the courts” (Brandt 66; Jacobs 9). And, of course, the high-profile prison riots of the 1960’s and 1970’s as well as the growing

³² Brandt presents Ames’ narrative “not because it is representative of people sent to prison – for it clearly is not. Nor is this case meant to be representative of how one unusually humane, gifted, and hard-working individual can overcome all odds – although it clearly is” (58). Instead, Brandt’s aim in including Ames’ narrative is to “examine in detail how barriers and opportunities for literacy learning arise out of accumulating struggles for economic and political advantage, struggles to which the powers of print have increasingly become tied...Ames was able to reroute even some of the most oppressive aspects of literacy’s power into a project of justice and self-rescue” (58).

civil rights movement at the time led to pressures to expand rights and improve prison conditions both in terms of the walls that housed inmates as well as the words that they might have access to. As I noted in Chapter One and Two, the popularity of *The Angolite* as well as its range of possible topics drastically increased at this same social moment; while this publication certainly existed and was important before the 1970s, the writers involved with *The Angolite* during this time frame had a much larger range of choices and opportunities because of larger, more distant forces that affected their literacy practice.

In Ames' own story, "a legal aid agency operating at the prison began to expand its presence, helping the inmates and prison staff construct a functioning law library" (Brandt 62) and donating instruction in legal writing and research to inmates who, in turn, would teach other inmates.³³ While Ames' literacy narrative essentially begins with tutelage via a nun who volunteered as a teacher within the prison system (Brandt 60-63), it was his work within the legal clinic and various therapy groups that led to his own sense of literacy and fulfillment. Brandt argues that narratives such as Ames' encapsulate the "relationships between institutional developments and individual literacy development. Ames' success resided not in a simple motivation to stay clean and work hard [in a degree program]...but in a complex motivation encompassing personal history, current conditions, and future ambition" (69). It is more than just "wanting to learn," but rather an ability to piece together opportunities through institutional operations already in progress as a sort of scaffold towards literacy that leads to what inmates such as Ames would deem success.

³³ Stephen J. Steurer's history of correctional education literacy models notes that prison administrators during the 1960's and 70's were "suspicious of inmates working as paraprofessionals because of the authority role they could assume over other inmates...Even though standardized testing demonstrated there were hundreds of completely illiterate inmates who needed help, schools program could not generally enlist inmates as tutors" or in other work-roles related to literacy. Obviously, such attitudes have changed, but this shift has probably more to do with the fiscal constraints on prison budgets rather than enlightened attitudes toward literacy and lifelong learning" (49).

But does this “success” actually challenge the notion of the prisoner as illiterate? Does it not actually re-inscribe the notion that the system works and works well, that inmates such as Ames are proof that nothing needs to be changed when it comes to inmate education – despite the fact that the programs and opportunities for literacy education that are based in practices beyond workbooks and standardized testing (as noted in the previous section by Collins and challenged by inmate-teacher/scholars such as Boudin) are almost absent in prisons within the United States? Brandt is keenly aware of the difficulties of inmate education and does not explicitly position Ames as a story that can be easily emulated. But considering Sloop’s discussion of the decade of “just desserts” policy of incarceration, narratives such as Ames’ seem loaded at best. While *Angolite* writers certainly make use of structures already in place (such as the mere existence of *The Angolite* itself), their participation in mainstream discussions of discipline seem quite different than the type of story that Brandt lays out for us. Although *Literacy in American Lives* is indeed a crucial work in recent studies of literacy, one might argue that the literate practices of *Angolite* writers also deserve recognition; they attempt to enter a discourse that seems totally impenetrable and yet shapes their day-to-day lives.

While Brandt offers a single inmate literacy narrative within a larger study of literacy sponsorship, the work of Anita Wilson is of particular interest in framing our understanding of the role of literacy within the penitentiary system in that she has exclusively written about her ethnographic experiences in UK prisons. The overall aim in her project – as reflected in the chapters and articles briefly discussed below – is “to show that far from being the anonymous docile mass that statistics would suggest, people in prison retain a strong sense of personal agency, which they apply in culturally appropriate ways” (“Four Days” 67). Such a stance is quite different from our typical understanding and positioning of the American prisoner; one

might argue that while Wilson and a writer such as Angela Davis are separated by a generation, an ocean, and specific fields of study, both writers are actively involved in changing cultural perceptions of prisoners. Again, while writers such as Sloop show how American prisoners have been represented in mainstream media in a number of ways, it seems that we typically see prisoners as illiterate, voiceless, and, in many cases, irredeemable. As an ethnographer, literacy scholar, and spatial theorist, Wilson attempts to offer a counter-narrative that focuses on literacy, empowerment, and community.

In each of these essays, Wilson argues that literacy related activities, practices, and artifacts play a central role in an inmate's struggle to make sense of the prison world. Grounded in the work of Street, Barton and Hamilton, and other New Literacy Studies writers, Wilson shows in a number of ways that while the literacy practices of participants in her prison-based study might not fit the autonomous model of literacy as we commonly know it, such practices "make sense" within the contextualized community of the prison. However, unlike other literacy scholars, Wilson has published both within contemporary journals of literacy studies as well as such periodicals as *The Journal of Correctional Education*; such a stance is interesting in that many writers noted within this chapter that deal with prisons seem to only write to professionals within their own scholarly community and therefore, as the saying goes, "preach to the choir." Wilson, on the other hand, is trying to connect with professionals within the business of incarceration – a practice that is to be applauded by other scholars working towards social change.

In the earliest of her articles, "Speak Up – I Can't Write What You're Reading: The Place of Literacy in the Prison Community," Wilson critiques the findings of the National Adult

Literacy Survey and other reports based in Europe and Australia; again, her statements ring true with the overall tenets of the New Literacy Studies:

...general statements and statistical evidence about prisoners' low levels of literacy are not only a gross misjudgment of prisoners' actual abilities but that confining the assessment and measure of prisoners' literacy to institutional testing is seeing only part of the prison literacy picture. (95)

While Wilson's decade of experience as an ethnographic researcher at the Young Offenders' Institution in the North of England and as a member of the Lancaster University Literacy Research Group is both physically and ideologically distant from our own understanding of prisons in the United States and Louisiana State Penitentiary specifically, her studies of prison and literacy offer a useful alternative to the typical and totalizing notion of prisoners as illiterates.³⁴

Wilson argues throughout her published work that literacy activities in prison "should not be categorized in the same way as literacy in the outside world" ("Speak Up..." 96) because such practices as letter writing, graffiti, poetry, and legal depositions, "are reflected by and are a reflection of the ideology of the social community in which they take place" ("Speak Up..." 96). Or, as Wilson states elsewhere, "penal institutions have a social dimension, supporting and supported by a network of social practices in which a complex arrangement of multi-literacies flourish" ("Absolutely Brill..." 197). These practices, in Wilson's view, challenge the notions and perceptions of prison as an asocial – and illiterate – environment. As long as the criterion for literacy is singular and autonomous (again, the stance that writers within the New Literacy

³⁴ In her 1999 chapter, "'Absolutely Truly Brill to See From You' Visuality and Prisoner's Letters" from Barton and Hall's *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, Wilson offers an account of the difficulty of ethical and practical considerations as a researcher, friend, and occasional counselor of inmates: "any idea of retaining a purely analytic stance...was a naïve dream on my part...I partially relinquished my role as impersonal observer and accepted the more honest position of interactive, personal correspondent" (180-81) While this discussion would stray away from an already lengthy review of prison-based literacy studies, her discussion of these ethnographic matters is worth consulting for anyone interested in such research.

Studies movement react against), perceptions of prisoners and prisoner-literacy abilities will continue to be misrepresentative.

Wilson questions both the aforementioned commonplace assumption of prisoners as illiterates and the practice of prisoners prioritizing spoken modes of communication over written ones. As Wilson notes, “Writers have to make decisions as to the appropriateness of the literacies they have command of and of the literacies required” (96). Such requirements and situational applications might seem far from the foci of standardized assessments of literacy. Again, Wilson makes no apology in her critique of such methods as NALS testing:

Testing purely on document/prose criteria...hardly does justice to the skills required for maintaining correspondence links with the outside world [one of the major components of her article]...nor does it confront the issues surrounding whether literate skills are the most appropriate form of communication in any given situation. (97)

As Wilson notes, “It would seem then...that rather than prisoners’ participation being determined by their levels of literacy ability, it is rather the nature of the system that imposes the need to speak rather than write” (98). Within her brief narrative of the typical induction process within the English prison system, Wilson shows that “literacy is an unnecessary talent as the opportunity to write has been removed” in most exchanges between inmates and staff. Requests for medical appointments, for example, are required to be oral rather than written. But even in those situations where written responses are allowed, such as Adjudication Reports, many inmates in her study prefer to employ oral communication; such a choice is based “on their perception of the social context in which the interaction [between staff and inmates] took place rather than on their levels of literacy proficiency” (97). As summarized by Wilson, “written communication is often denied to offenders coming into a system that prioritizes protocol over prisoner, [yet] prisoners themselves often refuse to engage in aspects of protocol where literacy

can be of little service to them” (98). In short, the inmates in her study often chose to use oral instead of written methods of communication because written documents, as Wilson and others argue via both academic argument and narrative/memoir writing, can be seized (and “lost”) and/or held against them by staff members. Such practices as note-passing between inmates and letter-writing to audiences both inside and outside the prison “requires an element of daring and can carry a high price in terms of punishment” (“Speak Up...” 98). Yet such practices are crucial in maintaining an identity within the corrections environment.

While Wilson investigates many different literacy practices, she argues that “Letters – more than any other form of literacy-related prison activity – are a prime indication that prisoners are inordinately successful in their endeavors, and not only display and use their literacy talents but use them in a way specifically designed to retain a sense of identity” (“Absolutely Brill...” 197). Recounting the significance of letter-writing for inmates involves a rhetorical approach in that, letters of request to staff and wardens looks quite different than letters to inmates at other institutions³⁵ or letters to family members or others outside the prison; “each group,” Wilson notes, “has distinctive qualities, purposes, and elements of visuality” (184) and that the “[v]isibility of such documents is open to various interpretations depended upon the cultural position of the viewer (185).

By beginning with the letter as material object – often kept in “a home-made box that looks like a small filing box or letter rack” or “an excellent letter holder...made from some kind of a box” (183) – Wilson argues that restricting interest to mere content ignores the significance of “visual and visible qualities” (183), a practice that extends back to H. Mayhew and J. Benny’s findings in their 1862 monograph, *Criminal Prisons of London*. Wilson’s title reflects the

³⁵ It is interesting to note here that letters sent between prisoners within the same institution (at least in the U.K., according to Wilson) have very subversive, culturally-specific alternative names: “stiffys,” “kites,” and “moodyys.” Wilson unpacks the meaning behind these alternate terms at length within this article (184-87).

importance of visibility and what she dubs “paraliteracy” features of prison-oriented letter writing; the photocopied examples she includes in this essay (and others, preferring if at all possible to let the inmates who take part in her study to speak for themselves) not only display ornate drawings and decorative penmanship (“...reminiscent of monastic institutions, created in an environment which has some resonance with the secluded, cellular, and removed nature of closed prison existences” [197]) but also subversive codes that can only be explicated by those within the intended audience.

In short, Wilson shows that writing is indeed quite important to the incarcerated members of her study by noting that letters are read, re-read, kept in spaces that can be compared to shrines or altars, and often decorated with visual features that can, in fact, hide subversive meanings that only “make sense” within specific audiences. Such practices, Wilson argues, are wrought with meaning:

To create an image as a person with wide social networks using the visible proof afforded by letters and cards is considered in prison to be preferable to being seen as an institutionalized prisoner with no outside connections. (192)

Such an understanding of inmates and literacy fits the scope of Wilson’s larger project. By simply looking at prison correspondence (a single aspect of the realm of writing and reading that prisoners are engaged in, such as “[R]eading notices, books, rules, magazines, letters, forms, more forms, newspapers, legal depositions, posters...lists, appeals, poetry...writing in education classes and vocational courses), it is clear that inmates “are creating and re-creating activities, actions, perceptions, and practices drawn from any number of social worlds, re-appropriating various kinds of letters to sustain and retain a sense of social identity within their day-to-day lives” (198). Instead of being “just a prisoner,” such literacy practices allow her participants to represent themselves as something less faceless, totalizing, oppressed, and, in short, hopeless.

This sense of personal inmate identity within “the conflict between the imposition of institutional worlds and identities and their desire to retain a social and individualized lifestyle” as Wilson argues in what is perhaps the most theoretically-oriented of her articles, “‘Four Days and a Breakfast’: Time, Space, and Literacy/ies in the Prison Community,” “can only be resolved by the creation and maintenance of a third space” (67):

On the one hand, prison tries to push prisoners into an institutional space which prioritizes institutional literacy, while, on the other hand, prisoners resist by defending their personal space with contextualized literacies that carry traces of outside world practices and activities. From what appears to be a no-win situation, this tension is resolved by the selective amalgamation and colonization of institutional and situated literacy/ies which both constitute and are constitutive of a third space. (70)

Within this third space (a concept grounded in postcolonial theory), inmates can both *resist* and *exist* in the space of the institution – a space that has been discussed at length by Goffman (one of the cornerstones of Wilson’s project) as well as the other writers mentioned so far. While the “abstract but no-less-real spaces of unemployment, poverty, and discrimination” (71) as well as public schooling have certainly influenced the lives of inmates before they entered the prison system, Wilson notes that “[I]ronically, they are forced to inhabit the official spaces occupied by systems of welfare, justice, and job seeking where they are required to negotiate complex bureaucratic paper trails” (71). Wilson goes to great lengths to separate what is within the “parameters of knowledge but not their experience” (71) of most inmates within her study; while activities such as “reading books, magazines, writing poetry, or engaging in correspondence” (71) are not a common aspect of these participants’ lives outside of prison, “such activities and practices are revisited and taken up as an appropriate rebuttal to carceral spaces” (71-72). These practices are reconfigured within institutional spaces, again, to help make sense of a space consumed by power relations and enforced identities.

Wilson shows how such reconfigurations can include official prison documents (such as inmate request forms for Christmas trees as a joke shared by both inmates and prison employees) and even physical spaces; for example, she shows how a certain section of the prison in which this study takes place is renamed – if only unofficially and within the prisoners’ own social circles – by the inmates themselves (“using a term more in keeping with a news report or a historical document than prison terminology” [73]). “In each case,” Wilson argues, “prison spaces identified by the institution are (re)configured in order to support and validate activities and practices drawn in from the outside world” (73). Later in this essay, she shows how calendars – a staple of prison movies and other public/popular representations of incarceration – are manipulated by inmates to help them devise alternative timetables that are far from the totalizing constraints of timetables and institutional schedules. “Various activities and practices around literacy/ies,” according to Wilson, are central to the reconfiguration of both physical and textual space:

Taking place in the institution, [these activities and practices] cannot be classed as totally outside even though many of them reflect aspects of outside public and personal worlds. Yet neither can they be said to be totally inside when many of them reflect outside as well as inside conventions...After considerable discussion, prisoners and I came to the conclusion that while in prison their major concern was not to become ‘prisonized’ or ‘institutionalized.’...In order to ‘win the battle’ people in prison construct a space between inside and outside worlds where they can ‘occupy their minds’ while living out their everyday prison lives. (73-74)³⁶

But what seems to be missing from studies such as Wilson’s is the concern with how inmates might participate in mainstream discourse: the reading and writing and speaking acts that shape our understanding of discipline. Narratives about letter-bags as shrines or letter writing as subversive and counter-hegemonic or accounts of “Third Space Literacies” are indeed

³⁶ Or, as noted by hip-hop artist Nas, “Though incarcerated, your mind’s out.”

interesting and helpful, but such accounts can only go so far in our understanding of prisons and literacy. While Wilson's descriptive analysis of the types of writing that inmates do and why they take part in such practices extends our understanding that "literacy" is hardly autonomous and that prisoners (or, at least, the prisoners that she studies) are certainly literate in many important ways, I wonder how helpful such work actually is in light of the ability for inmates to take part in national discussions about incarceration – a participation that the writers on *The Angolite* staff are certainly a part of as I noted in Chapter 1.

While the literacy practices of Wilson's participants certainly challenges stereotypes of inmate illiteracy and helps these inmates resist institutionalization, it is in the work of Eleanor Novek that we see inmates taking part in a literacy practice that allows them to connect to others outside of their own prison. In two recent articles that deserve attention here, Novek narrates her experiences with a prison journalism class at a minimum-to- maximum state women's prison in the northeastern United States.³⁷ Over the course of two and a half years, Novek, along with a colleague, visited "Clara Barton State Prison" (the pseudonym she assigns for the facility) sixty times in an attempt to train inmates who wished to improve their writing skills and take part in founding a prison newspaper:

[The program] would offer the incarcerated women a venue for self-expression and communication in a context where they were otherwise without voice. We also wanted to raise inmates' interest, skills, and confidence to a level where they could independently sustain a regular publication schedule (6).

Like Morris and Baird, Novek is quick to point out the difficulties that inmate journalists face. Most inmate journalists at the few prison newspapers left in the United States work in obscurity for little to no financial reward (and all of the inmates in her study were employed by

³⁷ While issues of gender and sexuality may differ in men's and women's prisons, Novek's study raises issues of identity that are important to my analysis of *The Angolite*.

the prison in jobs other than the newspaper that paid less than a dollar per hour). Use of such basic tools of the trade such as telephones and postal mail are highly regulated, and Novek also describes challenges in establishing classroom and publication workspaces and the extremely limited resources available to inmates within their prison library. Novek, like Davidson and other inmate instructors discussed in this chapter, also comments on the difficulties of instructional duties:

If officers decide to conduct a shakedown during the hours regularly scheduled for classes, all teachers may be turned back at the gate, their classes abruptly cancelled for the day. If a fight or an outburst occurs anywhere in the prison during a class period, teachers and staff may be locked in wherever they are... (13).

But perhaps the most disturbing element to her study involves issues of censorship and power – an issue that Angola wardens since C. Paul Phelps have claimed is not connected to *The Angolite*. Novek describes prison journalism as “the devil’s bargain”: “administrators extend inmates the privilege of creating a newspaper that gives them voice but can revoke that privilege suddenly and arbitrarily” (20). Morris, in a similar manner, offers a litany of narratives where prison newspapers are dismantled by administrators; a recent example involves the *Echo*, published by inmates in the Texas prison system and shut down in 2001 after the highly publicized escape of seven inmates – an act that had little connection with the work of the seventy-three year old prison newspaper (Morris xiii).

Novek describes both a meeting with the warden where a list of topics is presented as certain to be censored as well as the general fears of the inmate journalists participating in the project; one inmate participant is quoted as stating “So what are we supposed to put in? Just all nice stories about the positive things that the warden wants to see?” (19). Morris provides an even more threatening account:

A prison journalist who is unwilling to go along with the censor's capricious blue pencil may find the description 'uncooperative, disrespectful of authority' in his parole application file. No inmate wants to spend an extra day behind bars, but for some, pursuing a story may mean just that. (10)

Considering the closed nature of the prison that Angela Davis describes at the beginning of this chapter, it is clear that even such scholars as Morris and Novek, despite their research expertise, might not be able to know the full extent of prison newspaper censorship. Over time, Novek shows how participants begin to develop strategies to avoid censorship based on reflective experience and classroom conversations:

Stories protesting the criminal justice system in general – draconian sentencing laws, the growth of the prison industrial complex, the threat of hepatitis C or AIDS in prison – will run uncensored. However, articles passing judgement on this institution or this warden's policies – even cartoons that poke fun – will not be tolerated. (19)

Articles in this publication cover a variety of topics, all chosen by the inmates themselves. One edition that Novek showcases includes discussions concerning sentence commutation, family visitation rules, and hepatitis C within prisons as well as a profile of a prison chaplain and coverage of a volleyball tournament. There are also several opinion columns – complaints about food, encouragement in self-improvement – as well as poetry and even recipes. Novek admits that some of these articles, especially those that espouse self-improvement while serving time, “may be an attempt to perform the newly ‘corrected’ identity to prison authorities to gain respect or privileges, or they may demonstrate that some women internalize the images of themselves fed back by the prison system” (15). Yet Novek argues that such publications are incredibly important to participants and audiences and such practices can offer a number of benefits, including training in a range of literacies.

For example, journalists in both the free world and within the prison system learn to be careful researchers and gain experience in writing to a wide range of audiences. Staff members learn how to make group-based decisions and work collaboratively at a number of tasks. Furthermore, “They recognize their ability to inform, educate, and comfort and may reframe their identities as advocates for others. These experiences lead some journalists to express a sense of empowerment, self-awareness, or agency that inspires confidence and directs action” (8). While the criminal backgrounds of the participants would probably keep them from obtaining jobs in professional newsrooms upon release, the writing, researching, editing, and desktop publishing skills that were practiced via the everyday needs of the newspaper are certainly transferable to other employment opportunities. Group-based activities such as this newspaper also help develop social skills required in most professions.

Perhaps most importantly, “Producing an inmate newspaper may empower incarcerated people to make important social and economic changes for themselves” (9). Novek argues throughout her article that prison administrators should consider supporting penal press initiatives as a way of promoting “pro-social attitudes” (9) and as a form of writing instruction. The narratives and examples she provides from her ethnographic participants not only supports her claims but offers a compelling account of how a group of inmates begin to see themselves as something other than simply inmates; despite the fact that articles are pulled by the warden, these novice journalists become excited about writing and the possibilities published work can have inside a penal institution.

Novek continues her discussion of this particular inmate newspaper in “‘Heaven, Hell, and Here’: Understanding the Impact of Incarceration through a Prison Newspaper.” As an act of defiance against dominant representations of prisoners, she argues that inmate newspapers can

“offer their writers identity, a sense of agency in the face of oppression, and connection to a similarly situated audience” (283) despite the various difficulties that plague such publications. While Goffman argues that prison publications are essentially reflections of the viewpoints of administrators and therefore have limited potential for power and while most prison newspapers are rarely advertised or reviewed in public media forums or catalogued or archived, Novek argues that the penal publications “allow their creators and audiences to share small acts of defiance within the larger context of their subjugation” (287). Citing Freire, inmate publications such as the one that Novek studies allow inmates to create new ways of seeing themselves in relation to their captors; this new vision provides them a basis for social action and a method of resistance. In short, prison journalism “may provide a tool for transformation” (287).

While inmate journalists often describe the difficult realities of prison life, they also “construct multiple meanings of prison life for themselves and their audiences” (287). After categorizing the various topics discussed within this newspaper over a three-year period, Novek posits three basic themes that situate the prison “as a place of torment and transcendence” (292). In some articles, prison is described as a setting that “rescues a woman from her weaker self and sets her on the path of righteousness and hope” (293); writers identify themselves as wandering and lost before their incarceration and narrate how the prison offers them an experience that sets them on a new, righteous path towards some sort of enlightenment: “They may have broken laws and hurt others in the past, but the prison’s harsh mercies have forced them to look inside themselves and repent. As their writings testify, out of the evil of the prison comes the good of repentance and the productive return to society” (294); although Novek does not cite Malcolm X, it is easy to see connections between the writings she discusses within this theme of salvation and his autobiography. Novek writes that such “heaven” narratives reflect how inmates

discover, over time, a developing sense of empathy and a supportive social network that eases the harsh burden of the prison experience.

Other articles note “the women’s sense of loss of identity, lack of emotional contact and support, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, physical distress, and the merciless passage of time” (294). Positioned as “hell,” the prison is a site of separation from family (and especially children – Novek notes that 74% of women behind bars are mothers) as well as a place marked by physical pain. Among the short samples of inmate writing Novek provides that fit this theme is a gut-wrenching personal narrative from an inmate who reflects upon her child’s birth behind bars and having to give him up:

I only had three days to bond...but it was the best three days of my life...It’s the third day and we are ready to be released, except to different destinations. I gave him all the kisses I could before leaving; it felt like my heart wanted to stop. They finally took my son back to the nursery while they shackled me to come back to prison. (295)

A final theme, designated as “here,” describes prison as “a liminal space of extremity where women faced with extraordinary challenges can rise to cope with them” (298). Articles in this category deal with such topics as maintaining health in prison (“where diseases like HIV and hepatitis C are rampant and medical care is hard to get” [296]), prison education and vocational training, and even the newspaper itself. One article that she briefly discusses, a response to a interview with fellow inmates written by a local newspaper, shows how her participants react to being portrayed as hopeless by mainstream media: “The title gives the impression that all women at this facility sit in their living areas and cry ‘Poor me,’ ‘Why me?’ and ‘Not me’...What about more attention given to healing, insight, overcoming obstacles, growth, self discovery...?” (298). The “here” theme does not ignore the difficulties of prison life nor only see prison as a site of

salvation. However, this theme “allows them to see themselves as capable agents in a social setting, ready to act on their own behalf whenever conditions permit” (298).

While Novek’s earlier article explicitly connects the practices of an inmate newspaper with literacy education as well as community building, both pieces show how a group of incarcerated women writers who “displayed a broad array of literacy abilities, ranging from very elementary levels to college level fluencies” (299) built a community via the act of writing and sharing. Although compositionists such as Harris have critiqued the overly positivistic concept of “community,” Novek shows through her examples and analysis how incarcerated women produce texts that are both resistant to dominant representations of prison life and incredibly meaningful for participants. Her participants explicitly describe themselves as a community of writers that, in Novek’s words, can “challenge society’s definitions of them with oppositional meanings rich in lived experience, self-expression, and group vision” (298). In the work of these writers, we might find a model that not only explicitly offers writing instruction (via a method of learning-by-doing) but also allows inmates to carve out an identity for themselves that is apart from roles assigned to them by dominant forces and that will help them survive the numbing nature of the prison system.

Drawing the Chains Together – Some Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this chapter, Wacquant’s detailed discussion of the prison system and his lament concerning the lack of extended recent studies that focus on the prison population presents a portrait that is bleak at best. Physical conditions, according to his account, are horrific, and the lack of sustained educational programs within prison systems merely creates and sustains a “prison class.” As I noted earlier, it might be rash to judge an entire system by a single account of a single space; however, the findings of the NALS as well as the testimony of prison

educators clearly show that the vast majority of inmates within our penal system lack the literacy abilities to take part in employment that will help them avoid returning to a criminal lifestyle upon release. Furthermore, these same testimonies show that while there might be some distinct connections between literacy acquisition and lower recidivism, literacy education behind bars takes a backseat to punishment and confinement. What we're left with is, in short, a vicious cycle that allows dominant classes to remain dominant and lower economic classes to either remain in subservient roles or, more pertinent to my study, fill our prison cells and help perpetuate a booming economic system that relies on a steady stream of inmates, as noted by Hallinan and others in the previous interchapter.

Our prison population is growing. However, as argued by Morris in his historical account of the penal press, the penal body has been effectively gagged and bound by the forced decline of prison publications that can potentially reach an outside readership. In a recent interview, Morris posits, "If you talked to a prisoner today, they wouldn't even know these things existed" (Caldwell). Like prison education programs, publications that allow inmates an opportunity to use their time behind bars productively and to contribute to their own community are clearly less valued than the chains and walls that keep them divided from the free world. Although prison spaces are often represented in films and television programs, our public knowledge about what actually takes place within jails and penitentiaries is limited; while what remains of the penal press is certainly limited in its ability to speak, as noted by Novek, such a practice gives at least a small opportunity for resistance. As argued by H. Bruce Franklin, "The worse the conditions in prison, the more necessary it is to keep people from knowing how bad the conditions are" (Caldwell). Like Angela Davis' work, this claim resonates with the public

reluctance to face the hidden realities within the prison – a space that fails, perhaps purposely, to rehabilitate those held within its walls.

Yet despite these immense difficulties, we have been shown moments within the studies I drew upon at the end of this chapter that allowed for the possibility of emancipation and transformation within the often violent and always totalizing world of the prison – for resistance, if only the smallest of ways. Brandt analyzes the literacy acquisition of an inmate who was able to take advantage of changes within penal policy and become a contributing member to his own community via such acts as legal writing. Wilson shows inmates who practice localized forms of literacy to resist the numbing forces within prison environments. Novek, perhaps the researcher most closely connected to the present study, argues that inmates develop stronger literacy skills by writing and circulating their own texts. In having a chance to tell their own stories and represent their own concerns (even despite their warden's complete power to censor their work), these inmates began to see themselves as advocates and educators and not just inmates completely controlled by the prison system. As a prison news publication in its beginning stages, these inmates have a unique opportunity to not only shape the foundation of what I hope is a sustained practice, but also a chance to reshape their selves and how they use literacy.

Perhaps it is idealistic to imagine literacy as potentially transformative. Studies such as Stuckey's and Taylor's offer a portrayal of literacy that shatters the potential for emancipation and that merely perpetuates an inequitable class system. In my own teaching and research life, I share Stuckey's frustration with an educational system that, among other serious problems, offers the least amount of assistance to the students that seem to need it most. In my own work with inmate-tutors at LSP, I have listened to men who felt powerless when faced with the texts that completely define those who cannot afford effective legal representation – texts that Taylor

defines as “toxic” and that, like Stuckey’s understanding of educational systems, work against human freedom. Yet in the world of the prison, as I have shown in my analysis of more recent *Angolite* issues and as I will present in the remaining chapters, the continued process of telling one’s own point of view and working to improve the quality of life in a place designed to contain and repress is a process that promotes emancipation even in the most unlikely of places. Despite all the difficulties of developing and practicing literacy within the space of the prison – difficulties that each of the texts that I discussed in this chapter note and, at times, rage against – *Angolite* writers press on. They choose to see that writing and reading and researching and publishing as valuable practices that not only help sustain them, but also allow them to connect with others. They see themselves – and have the potential to be seen by others – as something more than just anonymous, docile inmates.

Second Count:
“To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet...”
-- Representation, Accountability, and Fear

“The first thing you have to understand in here is that you will never understand anything in here” (7).

Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance*

In her photo-essay “The Reappearance of Those Who Have Gone,” Deborah Luster cites a passage from writer, photographer, and social activist Dorothea Lange that seems particularly relevant to researchers involved with prison-focused field studies: “The best way to go into an unknown territory is to go in as ignorant, as ignorant as possible, with your mind wide open...not having to meet anyone’s expectations but your own” (7). And for most people, the prison is indeed an unknown territory in terms of what actually happens in places like San Quentin, Leavenworth, Attica, Angola, despite the hundreds of novels, autobiographies, and films drawn from the penal world that shape expectations and cultural understandings. Most Louisianans aside from those who choose to go to the rodeos in October and April – a limited glimpse, as previously argued by Shethar in Chapter One – have never seen Angola aside from filmic representations such as *Dead Man Walking* or from newspaper photographs.

Carleton’s history notes over and over how the sheer distance between Angola and any major city partially allowed for the brutality that occurred there for over a century as well as the lack of public knowledge about what actually happens there. Yet Angola is the locus of punishment in the Bayou State – the home of death row and the space where the majority of Louisiana’s lifers are contained. In this section, I would like to reflect more upon question of what is known and not known about daily life at LSP as well as the concerns of both inmates and officials as to how they are respectively represented.

Angola officials such as Warden Cain make claims that the prison is no longer a closed community of secrecy and silence; Cain himself has been lauded in the press for his openness with the media, his concern for inmates, his belief in moral rehabilitation, his offerings of hope – even in the last minutes of a damned man’s life en route to execution. Reporters such as Rick Bragg have been allowed inside Angola to cover topics such as the rodeo. Daniel Bergner, another journalist, was also allowed inside as well to investigate the rodeo and its inmate participants – only to have Cain request bribe money for extended access. Tours of the prison are often given to church groups and other organizations. But even these tours, usually led by an inmate (editor Kerry Myers, for example, was an occasional tour guide) are a simulation, a partial experience. Consider Deborah Luster’s comment, cited in Chapter One: in spaces such as the prison, we are only shown what those in charge want us to see.

On my trips to Angola, I would often stop at the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum before entering the main gates and getting searched. The museum is a small, lovely structure that stands, ironically, less than 100 yards from Death Row. Tourists who visit there can view the collection of contraband homemade weapons or read the framed and mounted newspaper accounts of Angola’s violent and bloody past. Perhaps these items, when situated in the location of a museum, are framed as a historical fact – a past, not a present. Again, it is certain that Angola is not the place it once was in terms of violence and brutality. But does the fact that such items are placed in a museum imply that violence no longer exists behind bars, that all is well? The museum is a representation of Angola, an argument for its developments and reforms.

One of the most disturbing elements I noticed at the museum is a mock cell that is patterned after the space where an inmate might have lived during the 1950s or 1960s. Once, I watched a family take photographs of each other in the cell, their hands wrapped around the iron

bars. The dark humor in this act, or in the act of watching inmates perform in a gladiatorial setting such as the rodeo, cannot be ignored. Nor can the souvenirs that can be bought at the museum – t-shirts that read “Angola: A Gated Community” or even costumes that mimic the old “big stripe” uniforms that inmates used to wear.

This was my first attempt at an ethnographic project of any sort; while I had read about classroom and writing center ethnographies as well as field studies with deviant communities such as biker gangs, dope growers, prostitutes, and junkies, I had never done this at all. No practice runs for me. And, again, it was my first time in a maximum-security prison. A friend of mine asked me at the time, *Shouldn't you maybe try something a bit smaller first?* I certainly felt ignorant about what I was getting into, and I still wasn't sure what I was even looking for. Some researchers, though, have argued that the framework required by ethnographic research – at the risk of sounding vague – might be intuitive and even required, at certain levels, for basic human communication:

...there is something of the prospective ethnographer in each of us...each of us must succeed as an intuitive participant and observer for sheer survival in a social milieu. Each of us must figure out how to cope with the world we encounter, the unexpected as well as the expected” (Wolcott 45).

Even after weeks of regular visits and discussions with both *Angolite* staffers and other inmates as well as my informal interviews with a former inmate advocate and a lawyer who had worked with Angola inmates, I was constantly on edge –not fearing for my life, since it could be argued that I was in the safest place in Louisiana. Just scared. The history of this place hangs still and constant, like the thick, stifling heat of a Louisiana summer. I believed that both the inmates and the administration were constantly watching me, wondering why I really wanted to be there and what my motives were. Certainly, these feelings of confusion and of being constantly observed

and doubted are part of any ethnographic experience. Yet ethnographic research within the maximum-security prison – a place that, by design, is divided from mainstream society – has its own particular challenges. Guards, administrators, and religious officials/volunteers are essentially the only “free people” that inmates see. I am none of these things, and it caused everyone to wonder why I was there at all.

Although I had turned down the job offer from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary teaching composition, the professor who had acted as my contact helped me arrange another meeting with Assistant Warden Cathy Fontenot. I proposed my plan of an ethnographically informed study of *The Angolite* as a community of writers while sitting in her office in the main administration building near the front gates of Angola. I also knew that I wanted to, in some way, give something back to the Angola community for allowing me access to the Angolite staffers. At the time, I was working as the Assistant Director of the Louisiana State University Writing Center, training tutors and advising writers from across the curriculum. I had been informed about a loosely-organized group of inmate tutors – some of whom tutored inmates in reading, writing, and mathematics as their assigned inmate job – and I wanted to somehow work with them, too, for as long as I could. While hesitant – asking whether or not my study was an expose of inmate-administration relations and noting the many freedoms that *Angolite* writers have – she signed off on my study on behalf of Warden Cain, and I agreed to the official regulations as stated in the Field Operations criteria for Social Science Research Regarding Prisons, Inmates and/or Effects of Incarceration (Dept. Regulation No. C-01-005). I was aware of who I was to contact, how I would be searched, when I could and could not be there, where I could and could not go – all elements of the official discourses that mark the

prison environment as well as those who wished to visit it. While I had been actively visiting the prison for several weeks as a guest of NOBTS, I was now officially sanctioned.

But a Warden's permission was only part of what I needed. I met again with current editor Kerry Myers and Lane Nelson; we drank coffee and spoke while images from a muted television screen tuned to CNN glowed with shades of blue against the stark white block walls. I explained the details of my project, beginning with the story of how I became interested in their publication and their history. I showed them copies of my prospectus and a paper that I had presented at a conference about the importance of *The Angolite*. Myers, surrounded by pictures of his grown children who have lived without their father's presence for over a decade, leaned back in his chair and listened; Nelson peered over his thick glasses and rolled a wad of chewing tobacco back and forth behind his lower lip. The quiet during my pauses felt like dull hammers in my head.

After a few moments, both Myers and Nelson agreed that it was an interesting project, one that they would gladly support. Both liked talking about writing, about history, and even this place that both wanted to leave more than anything else in the world. Myers even noted that it would be nice *to have someone different around here* – a statement that resonated with the difficulties of distance and exile that even *Angolite* staffers (with their relative freedoms when compared to other inmates) had to face.

But they both offered warnings; it would take time for me to build trust. Some staffers and contributors might not agree to interviews at first. One long-term writer, Clarence Goodlowe (who mainly covers Angola intramural sporting events) overheard our conversation as he walked into the office: *No way, he said, no interviews. No. I'm sorry.* He kept his eyes focused tight on the floor. Even as a member of the press, he was incredibly skeptical of how he

would be represented and quoted. I told him that I understood, and that I hoped he wouldn't mind my hanging around the office.

*Sure, what the hell. But I can't.*³⁸

*

On my first day working with the inmate-tutors, I introduced myself and asked them to do the same. Some told me that they went by nicknames: *Preacher, Taurus, Hollywood*. Some went by last names only. I asked them to call me by my first name, but a few could not let go of some sense of formality – *Mr. Scott, I liked that essay you gave us*.

We met in a small classroom in the education building; in some ways, as I mentioned earlier, it seemed as if we were all at a community college. There were twenty tutors that attended the first session; as the weeks progressed, about fifteen regularly attended our sessions. A few would drop in and out of our meetings. Some had other duties at the prison. Others would miss meetings because of medical issues or callouts or other activities that, as I noted in Chapter Two, are quite common in prison inmate life. Throughout my time listening to and working with these inmates, we often drifted from the readings that I had photocopied from handbooks on tutoring to talk about the challenges of tutoring inside a prison. All of them quickly admitted that they liked being able to help other inmates; *It's hard*, Preacher noted one morning. *Lots of these guys can't really even get through saying the alphabet. But we work slow. We focus. You gotta be consistent, but you gotta respect the other guy, too*. Many commented on the sheer amount of noise on the tier or in the dorms or even the tiny classrooms packed with inmates. And some felt that while they were respected by inmates and some officials, they often didn't get the credit they deserved. *It's strange*, one noted in the middle of a

³⁸ Again, as I noted in Chapter One, the italicized words in my interchapters are recollections of conversations based on field notes; they were not tape recorded. Throughout these interchapters, I attempt to portray these moments of dialogue as accurately as possible.

discussion. *I often work with twenty or thirty students at a time in the G.E.D. program. But the administration don't call me a teacher. They call me a tutor. That's fine, but I feel like I'm running a class.*

Many seemed quite happy to share their narratives of working with inmates. Preacher, for example, was incredibly proud of the fact that he had helped at least fifty inmates earn their General Education Degrees. He had also published poems in *The Angolite*, one of which was a quirky, funny ode to a ham sandwich. Taurus, in his syrup-thick South Louisiana accent, talked about the reading and writing he did in composing his various appeals and how he liked working with inmates who were just starting to learn how to read. *Gotta be careful...It takes a lot for someone to ask for help, here, you know?* Hollywood was fairly well known around the prison for writing and performing with an inmate drama group; his muscled, lean arms flailed as he talked – so much energy and exuberance, especially when he talked about performing and tutoring. He was especially helpful during role-playing exercises, where a pair of inmates would simulate a tutoring session, going over a short piece of writing. *No man, you can't just take the paper out his hands...You gotta keep it in between. You gotta show some good things and some weaknesses. Otherwise, he'll quit.*

Another inmate, James, mainly stared at the walls. He rarely spoke. He missed sessions frequently. A rough tattoo peeked out from under a rolled up shirt sleeve. He would shake my hand and be polite but was hesitant to offer comments or stories. He often was absent from discussions. I never asked him why. What I remember most about James was a comment he made to me one day as a session was ending. During our session that day, we had begun talking about roles, about how tutors have to be aware of such components as body language, eye

contact, word choice. He was, for once, the last inmate in the room. To be honest, I had no idea how to break the silence. I stood by the window, looking out over the flat fields.

You wanna know why I do this? He pointed at a guard tower in the distance, then looked me square in the eyes. *I don't think they really want us to do this, to read and write, you know? Maybe some of them. But writing and reading, that's how I get out.* That was the last time I ever saw him.

But perhaps my strongest memory of these sessions occurred the very next week. While slowly going through the first chapter of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a text that is deeply entrenched in the idea of literacy as transformation and the concept of how one sees himself or herself, Hollywood raised his hand.

Can I ask you a question?

Sure. What's up?

Are you gonna write a book about us and then leave and then never come see us again?

*

About two months after my initial meeting with Fontenot, I went to her office to make sure that all was still well with our agreement and simply to try and get to know her better. As an experienced warden, her ideas were crucial to my study, and I hoped to draw from her experience. My goals for the meeting felt pretty straight forward: to continue discussing protocols concerning access and safety; to detail and respond to questions from my case study participants; and to re-establish my work as an inmate-tutor discussion group leader, as my initial program with the tutors was a trial run. But as I entered her office, she quickly turned to the following sentence from my prospectus: "However, while both Louisiana State Penitentiary and Angolite staff members publicly claim that the magazine is 'the only uncensored prison

publication in America’...the history of LSP as ‘the bloodiest prison in America’ shadows this statement.” One sentence in twenty-six pages.

I thought your study was about literacy, she said, dropping the thick folder on her desk with a slap.

She was angry because I mistakenly did not follow a protocol. A few weeks beforehand, I sent her a scaled-down version of the research proposal, mostly free of academic references. When she cleared the study, the version for my dissertation committee – the official prospectus – was finished and ready for defense. I sent the prospectus straight to Myers and *The Angolite* so that they could get a good sense of the project before I met with them again. Weeks had passed since all this happened, and I hadn’t thought about it at all. Fontenot, after reflecting for a moment, understood the mix-up, but she reminded me that she needed to see everything that is a major part of the study – and she needs to see it first, before *Angolite* staffers or anyone else. And I agree. I explained to her that I am not accusing anyone of censorship, but readers would certainly wonder about the role of power relations between *The Angolite* and LSP administrators. How could one not wonder?

Fontenot continued, *People – researchers, journalists – come to Angola with a pre-existing notion of how it was before. This is a new Angola. It’s one of the most free prisons in America. It’s unbelievable what we let the inmates do... Warden Cain believes in creativity. I don’t tell The Angolite what they can and can’t write.* And then she stared at me, dead on center: *Your words make it seem as if you are on ‘The Angolite’s’ side – an us versus them situation.* The word “expose” was used over and over. I listened and took notes while my stomach crumpled.

Her concerns – she never uses the word “censorship” – were issues of security and validity. *We’ve been helpful*, she argued, and that is true. I had been allowed to walk the grounds alone, to meet with *Angolite* writers, to work for eight weeks with the inmate tutors. For a place like this, it was carte blanche treatment.

I tried to respond. Yes, my study is about literacy and community. Yes, my questions mainly focus on fairly neutral issues. But so much that is written in critical literacy studies shows how writing is shaped by – and at times, shapes – ideology: “literacy practices as inextricably linked to culture and power structures in society” (Street 433). But at that moment, my concerns were fairly basic: I knew that there were frictions between *Angolite* writers and the administration that acted as their “publishers.” How could there not be? But the question – whether or not *The Angolite* is truly censored – seems too much like a tell-all, and expose. I had to agree.

In this study, as in any of my presentations about Angola or *The Angolite*, I try hard not to paint Fontenot or Cain or anyone else as mere caricatures. I found out during this exchange that Fontenot was also a graduate student, that she had just gotten married and bought a house nearby – all situations that I can relate to in my own experience. We’re even about the same age. She clearly believes in her work and that the new Angola could be a model for other prisons. And I was glad that she was my contact and liaison to the rest of the prison administration. At one moment, she handed me coffee and pastries and asked me about her own research work. But throughout the conversation, the message was clear: her job is to protect the public image of Angola, which has certainly taken steps in becoming a more humane prison when compared to the days of the Red Hats and inmate guards and prisons without outside review boards.

She offered a sense of the line that I could cross as I left her office. No personal mail to inmates, only letters addressed to *The Angolite*, which can be read by LSP staff. All items I mail to *The Angolite* need to be sent to her first – no exceptions. I cannot sign up for personal visiting hours – something I had never considered. She then spent a few minutes lining me up with guards and staff members that I would need to see throughout this day at Angola. If I have questions, she reminded me, she would answer them. But crossing the line – which seemed clear and blurred at the same time – would result in the termination of the project.

*

In each of these situations – with administrators, with inmate tutors who valued their work and their contributions to their fellow prisoners – I learned a hard lesson about the layers of fear that penetrate each member of this community, regardless of status. While the differences in these players are obvious, each of these memories shows a distrust of outsiders, based in the powers of representation. Perhaps this is one reason why *The Angolite*, and what's left of the penal press in general, is important. While there are indeed numerous restraints on any prison publication – consider Novek's comments in Chapter Two – *The Angolite* is an attempt on behalf of a small group of inmates to represent themselves, to show what they see, “to prepare a face,” as Eliot once mused. And to do it themselves.

But is a story worth telling if you can't tell it all? And do we ever get a “whole story,” or do we only catch glimpses and fragments? As I left Angola that day to drive back down 61 towards Baton Rouge, my head spun with confusion. Everyone involved had shown me a degree of trust in a place defined by doubt. Cushman's study of writing and community and activism seems pertinent here; she notes, for instance, how she was able to enter a community mosque as a white female – a rare moment, for sure – because she was invited and was “lent the status of

their positions” (23). Her activist research includes “the goal of portraying participants in respectful ways while also conveying the texture and complexities of participants’ lived conditions” (36). But how does one do this within a prison, where there is little room for negotiation? “Will my question be treated,” asks Behar, another activist researcher, “as though it is coming from someone who has studied...or will it be seen as a highly subjective, idiosyncratic view of someone who has a personal axe to grind?” (11).

*

When you stare down a line of concertina, you might see birds’ nests tucked within the loose, sharp coils. They shape their homes amongst wires and steel; what is meant to slice, divide, and contain a community becomes shelter and solace. Bits of trash and twigs get woven together. I imagine craning my neck and peering across the line to find nests filled with robins’ eggs, pale blue and gleaming with promise.

A hack image, perhaps. But I’ll take what I can get for hope in one of the largest penitentiaries in the United States.

Chapter Four:
“Don’t Serve Time. Make Time Serve You”
– *Angolite* Representations of Community and Literacy

A useful tool to help us understand the writings of *The Angolite* – both as a complete and growing body of confinement literature and the specific writings composed during the particular decades that this study explores – is Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones.” While Pratt’s term has become well known in the field of rhetoric and composition – evoked by theorists and writing instructors and even occasionally taught in first-year writing classrooms – it deserves some unpacking here. Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths...” (34). Pratt’s work is often discussed within the larger field of composition studies to highlight the role of power relationships in classrooms. Her work complicates such mainstays of composition classrooms as peer critique sessions (or writing center conferences) and shows how the relationships between reader and writer cannot be taken for granted as “equal” in the hardly ever “safe space” of the classroom. In terms of pedagogy, Pratt asks us to engage rather than suppress conflict in the classroom as a way for students to negotiate meaning, to understand their unique and differing relationships to a text. Teaching, according to Pratt, is at its finest when an instructor can draw upon “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique” (39) as legitimate student response.

Pratt’s concept fits *The Angolite*’s rhetorical situation well. While *The Angolite*, again, is considered to be the official news magazine of Louisiana State Penitentiary, its writers and visual artists are still captives within the state’s only maximum security prison; their words and photos and drawings have been subject to close scrutiny by administrators throughout their entire print history. One might hypothesize that the various wardens since *The Angolite*’s beginnings have

acted as their publishers, with the power to allow or suppress information. Although Warden C. Paul Phelps' decision to allow *The Angolite* an amazing degree of freedom – arguably, more than any other inmate publication in the United States – the power relations between captors and captives can hardly be ignored. Furthermore, in light of Sloop's discussions of inmate representation that I noted in Chapter One, we could argue that inmates are not only contained by their wardens and guards, but also by their previous representations in mainstream newspapers, magazines, television shows, and popular films. In short, inmates are both physically and ideologically contained and controlled.

Yet as we will see in this chapter, *Angolite* articles that report on education efforts, collaboration between inmates, and the inmate library as a space of learning, reflection, and even sanctuary, provide a picture of the inmate world – and specifically the world of Louisiana State Penitentiary – with *inmates* as both its center and chronicler. While prison as a space is certainly numbing and potentially violent, *Angolite* writers offer representations of transformations – even in the smallest sense – of men who attempt to form meaningful connections with each other and with the outside world through literacy practices. I turn to Pratt because of her attention to the unequal power relationships that often exist between writers and their audiences – a theme that seems quite pertinent to *The Angolite* and its various purposes.

It is easy to see some interesting connections between Pratt's concept – drawn upon the unusual 17th century writings of an Andean of Incan descent to King Philip III of Spain – and the mostly African-American, former slave plantation turned privately owned penal lease system turned state-run prison known as Louisiana State Penitentiary. In her essay, Pratt describes the writings of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala and his attempt to articulate his frustration with the Spanish rulers of his homeland. The European understanding of Peru and the Americas during

the centuries of colonization, as Pratt notes, came mostly from European accounts as opposed to writings from Peruvian natives. Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, the larger work from which the essay "Arts of the Contact Zone" is drawn, argues that such European accounts of travel or exploration writing "produced" rather than "reported upon" Africa and the Americas for first-world consumption, allowing readers to see these constructed spaces as ripe for European commercial/colonial interests. Those who were colonized, of course, had no way of representing themselves and their own accounts to their colonizers. In short, they were silenced.

Poma's letter to King Philip III – a twelve-hundred page long tome including four-hundred pages of detailed line drawings and titled *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* – challenges such Eurocentric assumptions and offers "a new picture of the world, a picture of a Christian world with Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it" (34). Written in both Spanish and Quechua, the text appropriates the genre of the chronicle – "the main writing apparatus through which the Spanish presented their American conquests to themselves" (34). As Pratt notes early on in her argument, Poma engages in an official discourse for his own indigenous purposes:

In a couple of hundred pages, Guaman Poma constructs a veritable encyclopedia of Inca and pre-Inca history, customs, laws, social forms, public offices, and dynastic leaders. These descriptions resemble European manners and customs description, but also reproduce the meticulous detail with which in Inca society was stored on *quipus* and in the oral memories of elders. (34-35)

In writing his own history, Poma resists the representations of Incan culture that were constructed by Spanish colonizers – a tactic that seems right at home with the goals of *The Angolite*. The *New Chronicle* – the first half of Poma's letter – concludes with a revisionist account of colonization: "Guaman Poma mirrors back to the Spanish (in their language, which is alien to him) an image of themselves that they often suppress and will therefore surely recognize.

Such are the dynamics of language, writing, and representation in contact zones” (35). In other words, Poma attempts to enter a dominant, colonizing discourse and enact social change. While such an act in the face of domineering colonialism might seem futile at best, Pratt sees such acts as worthy of both academic inquiry and unapologetic awe.

Pratt’s description of the relationship between Spanish colonizers and their ruled subjects seems similar to the relationship between *Angolite* writers and readers – especially those readers who live beyond the gates of the prison who might only see inmates as illiterate and incapable (or even unworthy) of creative self-expression. Scholars at the time of the Incan text’s re-discovery were in agreement that Andean culture was far from literate – a presupposition often held within mainstream discourse about American inmates. As this odd, centuries-old letter, with its strangeness, its motives, and its context of colonialism, challenges assumptions about literacy in the Incan world, *The Angolite* helps challenge public assumptions about literacy and even such acts as collaboration and self-expression within the inmate world. Of course, there are obvious differences between the two situations and their contexts; Poma is arguing against an oppressor who used military power for conquest while *Angolite* writers present arguments aimed at both their immediate captors and readers who are unaware of prison problems. Furthermore, while Poma and the people he speaks for in his text are clearly direct victims of colonization, prisoners (unless held unjustly) are both victims and victimizers. It is difficult to sympathize with those who have shattered lives; as a field researcher, I often questioned why I was trying to connect with men who had committed murder and rape. However, showing that change can occur even within the hardest of felons is one of the most important purposes of *The Angolite*; I realize, of course, that some of these articles could be read as a performance deployed merely to play up to administrators and other people in positions of power – in short, a con job. There are

moments within this chapter where I yield to possible alternative readings that position these rhetors as less than sincere in their accounts and representations.

Pratt defines Poma's letter (and any writings that are situated within similar writer-audience relationships and contexts) as an *autoethnographic* text: "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35). For our purposes here, one could argue that *The Angolite* is a "new picture" of the world of the inmate: seen through inmate eyes, analyzed by inmate minds, written by inmate hands. Carleton's history of the Louisiana penal system argues over and over that both the citizens and the elected representatives of the state did everything possible to only see the inmates at Angola as the scourge of the earth, perfectly deserving of a harsh physical environment and brutal treatment; at best, inmates were viewed as cheap labor for prison and state agricultural and construction projects such as the levee system that protects the prison from the Mississippi River. As we will see in this chapter, *Angolite* writers offer a perspective that shows inmates as more than just state-owned chattel; while their lives as inmates are certainly limited and controlled, these writers and the inmates they represent work to improve the quality of their lives. And like Poma's curious letter, *Angolite* writers both use and reshape a familiar form of writing and publication – the newspaper/news magazine – to help them achieve their goals.

In this chapter, I begin by expanding my discussion of *The Angolite*'s purpose, noting some strategies staff writers have used to build trust with readers; I also re-establish how *The Angolite*, as a community of practice, allows staffers and contributors to feel useful and meaningful during their time behind bars. Then, I examine some moments where *The Angolite* discusses educational opportunities within Louisiana State Penitentiary, focusing not only on the

articles but also on various modes and motifs that run throughout these pieces. Next, I turn to some articles that highlight inmates working collaboratively and solving issues that affect the Angola inmate community. These moments portray a community that, while contained by a culture of violence and distrust of both authorities and other inmates, attempts to transcend differences; spoken and written negotiations and transactions such as the ones offered here can easily be seen as a form of literacy – a way of solving complex problems. Finally, I turn to articles that describe and narrate the history of the Angola Prison Library – a space that inmates see as their own sanctuary away from the toils of prison labor and the stresses of day-to-day prison life. It is positioned as a drastically different space than the rest of the prison – a differentiation that marks this space as almost sacred. In all of these selected texts, I pay particular attention to such Burkian elements as speaker, audience, purpose, and context – elements that all of these writers obviously have a clear awareness of in light of the tremendous risks concerning the penal press as a whole and *The Angolite* in particular.

One of the most important elements here is that *The Angolite* writers situate themselves in a number of roles: as chroniclers of events and changes within the penitentiary, as champions of inmates and administration who work to make themselves and their space within the prison better for all parties, as critics and historians, and, perhaps most important here, as public educators on the subject of the inmate community and its needs. These roles – while certainly limited by the prison space – imply a degree of agency and a radical shift from the docile role of the inmate who is merely serving time. A close reading of *The Angolite* reveals, among other topics, account after account of men who transform themselves into something more than just prisoners. Of course, this transformation does not take place all at once; I am not arguing that reading and writing magically make anyone – a student, an inmate, a dissertation writer –

instantly reformed or redeemed. Instead, the transformations that take place involve a long, reflective process where inmates decide that the roles that I stated above are important and can help improve the quality of life in a space where agency is limited. The writers and inmates that they represent in these articles are interested in making the best of their local environment.

While topics such as education and collaboration are hardly the only ones to grace the pages of *The Angolite*, I find them interesting for two reasons. First, as we saw in Chapter Two, there are serious problems in the world of inmate education; programs often lack funding for materials, staff, and adequate physical space. Because many inmate-students had negative early-experiences with formal education, they can easily become frustrated and eventually quit. Many of the articles featured in this chapter speak to those problems. I also find these articles interesting because of how they simultaneously report “objectively” – the maxim of all professional journalism as well as the key factor in Warden Phelps’ re-organization of *The Angolite* during the early 1970’s (see Chapter One) – and yet critique the totalizing nature of the prison institution.³⁹ Furthermore, while earlier articles seem to evoke a mainly Angola-based, inmate-only audience, later articles offer cues for readers beyond the boundaries of the larger penitentiary system. Cues embedded in background information – elements that would clearly be well known by LSP inmate readers – reflect a movement towards gaining and sustaining readers outside Angola’s boundaries of fences, fields, walls, and swamps. Instead of having their stories told by an outsider or an administrator, these writers strive and strain to tell their own stories as best they can – a risky business, but one that sustains them as human beings. *Angolite*

³⁹ A statement by Rideau in an October 1975 column helps support this concept of journalistic credibility as part of the overall ethical stance of *The Angolite*: “As a journalist, I can tell you that, for words to have an impact, there must be credibility, and there is none when the writer slings a charge then hides. On the contrary, that type of behavior only acts to destroy what little credibility prisoners have with the news media and the general public, makes us all appear as cowards not to be believed. And we are already associated with too many slinky, cowardly things in the public mind...I’m not saying that we should not write about controversial things or make charges. I’m merely trying to point out that freedom of expression is something difficult to obtain and maintain in a prison setting. This being so, we should exercise responsibility in the use of it” (18).

writers make use of their exiled position in a way that is constructive and – as many staffers might argue – self-enriching. Perhaps this need to explain one’s own place, daily life, and community concerns, is the main purpose – indeed, the *raison d’être* – of *The Angolite*.

“Bridges Across Razor Wire”

While the purpose of the penal press is a question rarely discussed explicitly, it has not always been entirely absent. In 1967, *The American Journal of Corrections* published a study entitled “The Penal Press: An Historical Perspective.” Its authors – Joseph K. Balogh, Charles Unkovic, and Elgie Raymond – were interested in the intent of the penal press: “...to ascertain if the penal press was written for (1) the administration, (2) the inmates, (3) the outside community, and (4) any or all of the above-mentioned categories” (Apr 20, 1967, 12). Interestingly enough, Balogh’s study was reprinted in the April 1967 issue of *The Angolite* – one of the many pieces of writing by “freemen” (and even academic scholars) included over the years. As I noted in Chapter One, the practice of publishing writers from outside the prison – such as legal and medical experts or, in this case, criminologists – is a common *Angolite* rhetorical strategy that attempts to further connect inmate and free readers and to establish a sense of credibility, a method continued in more recent issues. As I have noted already, this sense of connection is crucial to the overall purpose of *The Angolite*. Throughout the entire history of the publication, these writers have deployed a number of strategies to show that they are worthy of attention and that their accounts are valid. In this section, I offer more of my analysis of how these writers present themselves as ethical rhetors – a difficult task, considering how their status as inmates might easily overshadow any other roles these men might enact.

When compared to the present historical moment, the American penal press was flourishing during the late 1960’s, with such active publications as *The Atlantian* (GA), *The*

Presidio (IA), *The New Era* (Kansas), *The Mentor* (MA), *Lake Shore Outlook* (MI), *The Raiford Record* (FL), *The Pendleton Reflector* (IN), and *The Folsom Observer* (CA) (See Morris). To turn back further, 75% of federal prisons and 65% of state prisons had inmate publication opportunities in 1936. Yet most of these newspapers are now defunct – targets of various death sentences on state and federally funded inmate reform programs and of the movement towards “just desserts” penology (see Morris, *Afterward*). Balogh et al. cite their few scholarly precursors in both academic journals and popular magazines (such as Nina Mermey’s 1954 *American Mercury* article) that argue how the penal press could have been a deterrent against the twenty-three prison riots that took place in 1952: “...the majority of [inmate publications] made an attempt to present a sober and thoughtful analysis of prisoner problems and that, in essence, bitterness and hostility could be minimized...” (13). John Winterich, in his 1945 *Saturday Review of Literature* article, offered strong support for inmate publications, grounded in tropes of democracy: “...the freedom of the press (usually controlled by prison editorial staffs) is one freedom which should still be permitted to flourish in a place which is in itself the negation of freedom” (13). But not all of Balogh’s study reflected glowing support. Balogh et al. also cite an anonymous prison journalist, publishing in a 1931 issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, who “[I]n his ten years as prison editor...could only recall about ten men who could appeal to either inside or outside readers” (12). Furthermore, these hypothetical ten writers would be bound by censorship codes: they “could not state half the truth that he saw day by day, or at least what he believed to be the truth” (12).

This comment, and its citation within the study, reflects the general national attitude towards inmates and writing skills that scholars such as Anita Wilson and Tobi Jacobi would attack decades later. But Balogh and his colleagues – all white, male, tenured university faculty

members -- were clearly aware of the unique rhetorical and political situation of prison journalism. How could a body of writers within a prison fairly and accurately represent themselves to the outside world, considering such factors as the low levels of education amongst prisoners, the censorship codes imposed by prison administrators and wardens, and the stereotypes of inmates as violent, illiterate, uncooperative men held by the vast majority of Americans? It seems that inmate representation to both outside readers and fellow inmates is a difficult business – as tricky a dance as a zydeco shuffle in the blazing Louisiana sun.

Balogh et al.'s literature review, while self-admittedly inconclusive, produced the following speculation:

The major task of the prison press was related to the obtaining of good public relations for the prisoners and the administration. Next in importance was the fact of adding to the inmate's store of information and inspiration. Significantly, the circulation of magazines of federal institutions showed that their largest audience lived outside prison walls. Consequently, the federal penal press has had greater outside circulation than the state penal press.
(13)

The first half of this statement seems most interesting, considering our concerns about the purpose of *The Angolite*. Balogh's argument seems perplexing in light of a claim cited within the same article; the prison press "was one of the most obscure and misunderstood backwaters of American journalism...read mainly by the prisoners and their families, and by a handful of those people who had expressed an interest in penology" (13). And what of the role of rehabilitation? Some scholars noted in this study argued that the prison press provided rehabilitation for only its own staff members and only acted as a morale builder for its inmate audiences. And as we have seen in Chapters One and Two, the interest in rehabilitation within the prison community on behalf of voters and lawmakers on a national scale has waxed and waned over the years – a subject best argued in Joseph Hallinan's work. While many wardens and administrators claim

rehabilitation as of prime importance, financial cutbacks as well as “get tough on crime” campaigns position rehabilitation and education well below the central act of confinement: prisons exist to keep criminals off the streets and away from society, and nothing more. And because of the closed nature of the penitentiary, it is difficult if not impossible to see exactly how the few education/rehabilitation programs that exist are enacted and regulated (see Wacquant).

Still, one finding from Balogh’s study is worth noting here, in light of such educational concerns: “All members of the penal press send each other their publications. They practice self-criticism and constantly strive to improve the publications” (13). Such a practice, which seems right at home with contemporary teaching of writing that employs peer review methods and workshops that mirror methods used in creative writing classrooms, is well documented within the pages of *The Angolite*. What this long-standing practice of self-critique and sharing that Balogh notes also resulted in, therefore, was an interconnected web of words that formed a circuit from prison to prison and publication to publication – an information network that, ironically, existed between spaces defined by exile. Dozens of *Angolite* articles throughout its history as a publication explicitly state the staff’s own efforts to improve the quality of both the physical aspects of the magazine such as layout and cover art as well as the writing that makes up each issue and volume; *The Angolite* has also reported on the progress of inmate publications at other institutions. Both of these tactics can be seen as classic ethos-based arguments; by presenting themselves as responsible journalists, able to understand both their responsibilities as inmate-journalists as well as the crimes that sent them to the penitentiary, they implicitly argue for a collective self that is worthy of trust and professional respect. Furthermore, these tactics help bind *Angolite* staffers and contributors to a community with a shared set of goals that are in keeping with typical contact-zone self-representations – to show their world through their own

testimonies and analyses, to challenge public perceptions of inmates (especially those in Louisiana and the deep South), and to enter into a dialogue with free readers and inmates at other institutions.

Rideau and Wikberg's collaborations with university professors and other writers during this time – especially their publication of *The Wall is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana* with University of South Louisiana (now University of Louisiana-Lafayette) criminal justice professor Burk Foster (as discussed in the September/October 1989 edition of *The Angolite*) – also help carry this implicit argument of ethical reliability and trustworthiness. If university professors, book publishers, and professional journalists saw the work of *The Angolite* as valid and well researched and its primary staffers as worthy of shared resources and information, it stands to reason that free readers might safely trust as well. Televised appearances by Rideau and Sinclair – such as their June 19, 1984 discussion with former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger on ABC's prime-time news program *Nightline* – also helped challenge stereotypes and added to *The Angolite*'s ethical stance. While such televised appearances were hardly routine (although it was Rideau's third appearance on *Nightline* in the 1980's – see the July/Aug 1984 edition of *The Angolite*, 2), such programs always resulted in a barrage of letters to *The Angolite* in support of their publication. These appearances built support, built trust, and built bridges to the outside world, placing a face on our national prison problem.

However, this “face” is not presented to explicitly challenge the writers' own legal cases. *Angolite* articles –especially those in the 1970s and 1980s and even current issues – rarely if ever place their own staff members as the central subjects for profiles and feature articles. Staff writers do not challenge the fact of their own guilt, nor do they profile themselves in articles as victims or wrongfully accused. They are not writing to prove their innocence or to directly

appeal to the courts for their own cases. While contributors to the creative writing sections of *The Angolite* (non-staffers) often choose their selves and personal histories as subjects, staff members report on activities and situations that are subject to such basic practices of the world of journalism as fact-checking. This move also reinforces their implicit ethos-stance: by choosing such topics and maintaining a sense of journalistic distance (even in light of the close quarters of prison life), *Angolite* writers ask to be viewed as responsible and worthy of attention. This stance – a hard balancing act for all writers but particularly difficult for inmates writing journalistic accounts from behind bars – is a precious weapon in their act of resisting the traditional totalizing discourse of prisoners.

A large aspect of this balancing act involves working closely with the very men and women who rule their own containment. *The Angolite*, at least since the early 1960s, has had a warden assigned specifically to them, and *Angolite* pieces occasionally showcase how they have earned the trust of the Angola administration over time. For example, Rideau, in a May/June 1980 editorial, cites how Associate Warden Peggi Gresham was warned by officials at other prisons to not continue the freedoms that *The Angolite* had gained under C. Paul Phelps during the mid-1970's: "You let them go too far," the cynics argued, "You can't trust convicts – they'll fall on their faces and drag you down with 'em" (2). This anecdote, however, is used to counterpoint *The Angolite*'s 1980 George Polk Award for Special Interest Reporting: "the first time the award has ever been given to prisoners in its entire 32-year history" (2). Such an award (one of the many awards and recognitions *The Angolite* has earned over its history) reflects a validation on behalf of the "free world" – the very audience *The Angolite* began to cater to during the Rideau editorship. Another editorial from September/October 1984 praises the support of certain administrators:

...if *The Angolite* is the ‘best’ of its kind, it is due in large part to our having been particularly fortunate to have had a succession of wardens who...wanted *The Angolite* to be the best. We’ve acquired a new warden...[who] is a progressive administrator and believes in the concept of a free and aggressive prisoner press. (1)

By including such accounts within editorials, *Angolite* writers recognize their own situation and take steps to show how such administrators are a welcome help in reconnecting the penal population with the free world via the act of writing and reporting. If prison breaks the circuit between an individual and the free world, prison writing and published prison journalism in particular attempts to re-connect that broken circuit in a way that is meaningful for all parties. Journalistic writing, in a sense, allows inmates to temporarily challenge their own physical and ideological exile, to compose narratives on their own terms rather than passively accept narratives that are forced on them, and to feel worthy, meaningful, and productive during their sentences. Although Balogh, et. al, see inmate-administration relations as the primary motive for inmate publications, I argue that this move towards a free, outsider readership is more than just an appeal from inmate writers to their wardens and guards; instead, their writing is an attempt to counter how inmates are generally viewed in our national consciousness and to gain the trust of free readers – even in light of the heinous crimes that sent these writers to Angola in the first place. Balogh’s study also never takes account for how writing simply – or not so simply – allows inmate journalists to see their time behind bars as a meaningful (and even meaning-making) existence, a claim that is carried throughout the work of Wilson and others and that resonates throughout the body of *Angolite* work.

While I acknowledge that such terms as “self-worth” might seem hollow or merely emotional, it needs to be noted that many inmates, considering the totalizing nature of the prison, have little self-worth at all; in fact, it could be argued that this lack might have contributed to

their original crimes. Therefore, it might be best here to offer some brief reflections as to what *The Angolite* as both a collection of writings and as a continuing process means to its staffers. As Rideau notes in an editorial from March/April 1979, “Time in prison, for most, is meaningless, measured only in terms of length of confinement or how much longer until release – years remembered only in terms of special efforts waged, losses suffered or milestones achieved across the wasteland of the prison experience” (2). Statements such as this one appear over and over within the pages of *The Angolite*.

Arguably, then, the mere act of writing – without even considering the acts of publishing for multiple audiences or winning national awards and international acclaim (the latter easily proven with a quick scan of letters to the editor during these decades) – is an act of making meaning. One of the larger points I make in this study is that writing and publishing allows a certain degree of transformation for these inmates. By participating in the practices of *The Angolite*, these men develop an identity that is other than “just another prisoner”; instead, they are participants in an organization that is known and respected beyond the confines of the prison. Furthermore, these writers have a chance – if limited – to represent themselves, to tell their own take on the story of prison life. Consumed by the prison experience – boredom, violence, control, namelessness, exile – these writers transform their prison sentences into sentences, paragraphs, and essays. These activities are the quintessential enactment of the old prison maxim, “Don’t serve time. Let time serve you.”

Cellblock Classrooms: Education as Freedom

Some of us that reached out a few years ago and had the privilege to finish high school, taught by the men faculty of St. Francisville High, and to go on to take extramural courses from L.S.U. (receiving 3 hours credit for each college course we completed). I noticed none of this was newsworthy [in popular mainstream media], but a cutting or a killing was played up big in the news

media, never explaining the nature of the matter. The problem is too many men, and all of our feelings are tender. (Feb 1975, 21)

This statement by Angola inmate Monroe Green in an article entitled “Looking Back at Angola,” laments the difficult position of inmate education at Louisiana State Penitentiary during the mid-1970’s; “We are so remote back up here in these hills, that only a few committed religious people will come up to be with us” (21).⁴⁰ Green, like many other *Angolite* writers at the time, pinpoints both the challenges of location in dealing with educational staffing and how stories of educational success pale in comparison to tales of violence in the Louisiana and national press. Yet the mere phrase “reaching out” – perhaps a cliché, perhaps an idealistic notion considering the panopticonic gaze of the prison – stands as one of the main motifs in *Angolite* articles that center on education and inmate collaboration. What we are shown is not a gang of blood-thirsty felons, but rather a collective who, despite amazing difficulties, attempts to become something more than the crimes that brought them to Angola or the identity placed upon them via mainstream accounts of deviance.

Of course, the notion of identity is slippery at best. While I am raising questions about representations of small but important acts of transformation and resistance throughout this study, I realize that engaging in the practice of writing and educating does not negate the fact that these speakers and the men they represent via writing have all committed crimes. No amount of writing or education will ever change that fact, and I am not arguing that writing is a panacea for social ills. However, these writers and the men they represent all go to great lengths to try to improve their quality of life via the acts of reading, writing, and participating in projects that involve collaboration. They make a daily decision that such acts, while limited by their

⁴⁰ This statement – not by an official *Angolite* staffer but rather an inmate who writes to express his concerns with both education and prison overcrowding – foreshadows the role that the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary would play at LSP thirty years later.

incarcerated position, are worth doing. In the highly controlled and numbing world of the prison, this choice is incredibly important.

The numbers of “successful” students that Green cites are incredibly small: two former death row inmates who graduated with General Education Degrees, one of whom was also taking college correspondence courses. *Angolite* articles throughout the 1970’s and 80’s reflect insufficient educational funding, low levels of inmate morale and public support, and the difficulty of pursuing an education with the demands of the farm placed at premium. As argued in Tommy R. Mason’s August 1975 article: “There are problems: inmates losing interest, others not studying, the usual prison problems; but amazingly the program lingers on...driving the handful of inmates toward a better lifestyle” (21). Such problems existed on the other side of Angola’s gates as well; in 1988, as noted in an *Angolite* article from the May/June issue, Louisiana’s state adult literacy was the lowest in the nation (May/June 1989, 59), and Louisiana ranked 48th lowest in high school graduation rates. In the midst of these statistical extremes of first and near-last, Louisiana was 32nd in the number of adult male inmates enrolled in some sort of prison-based academic program (59). Here, recalling Foucault, we see how the problems of the prison reflect the problems of the free world.

As noted in “Education and Training,” another article from the February 1975 *Angolite* written by non-staffer Ken Kavalawski, books, equipment, and even physical space for classrooms were in short supply: “At present there is only one teacher...besides the Department Director...we hope to remedy this unfortunate situation very soon” (23). The program at the time only had facilities for one hundred students – less than ten percent of the total inmate population in 1975. Looking back to 1969, articles such as “Progress in Education” (February 28, 1969, 9) reflect improvements from the absolute lack of a formal school setting (“Mr.

Langlois [Director of Education at LSP in the late 1960s] and his staff, which he hopes will be enlarged soon, are beginning a program of in depth counseling to sound out the academic needs of our community” [9]) but also note the drastic needs for aid as well as the fears that some inmates might have when considering a formal education: “...a healthy student to teacher relationship will be established and rewarded. Tension or punitive actions will be kept at a minimum” (9). But such appeals to inmates seem difficult to swallow when faced with the litany of problems facing Angola’s somewhat piecemeal educational/rehabilitation-focused programming as featured in the majority of articles from the 1970s and 1980’s, as seen here in an extended excerpt from June/July 1973:

As there has never been a comprehensive educational and/or vocational program here at Angola I find it difficult NOT to presume that the institutional administrators throughout Angola’s history felt that physical labor is the key to rehabilitation and therefore the answer to recidivism reduction...(of course, this is disregarding the monetary gain so many state officials have realized throughout the years). But a look at the statistics will show clearly that Louisiana’s recidivism rate is increasing...A man may enter Angola uneducated but is not placed in an educational program. He may be assigned work as a dormitory orderly, a yard orderly, a kitchen orderly...but there is no great demand in the ‘free world’ for men experienced in these ‘fields’ – and he is still uneducated upon release...A man incarcerated here has very little chance of enrollment in a vocational [or educational] program. One reason is the lack of funds needed for implementation of a comprehensive program; another reason is the unavailability of competent instructors, a problem complicated by Angola’s remoteness...Education, vocational training and post-release professional assistance won’t solve ALL the problems nor will they ELLIMINATE recidivism, but they will solve SOME of the problems and REDUCE recidivism...and any progress is better than remaining in the rut we are in now. (2-3)

Jimmy Miller, the writer of this piece and a frequent *Angolite* contributor during the 1970’s, connects the desire for formal, sustained, comprehensive inmate education with recidivism -- a serious concern in the free world. By articulating the concerns of his fellow

inmates – in a printed, circulated news magazine, nonetheless – he provides frame and focus instead of a mere emotional rant, evoking what can be imagined as a free audience. Instead of presenting a pathos-based argument – where he might use a profile of an inmate or a descriptive piece to appeal to sympathy – he constructs a linear, logical argument: the money spent on training inmates will offer an opportunity for paroled/released felons to contribute to their communities and not re-enter the prison system and therefore drain more tax dollars.⁴¹ A bold-faced, capitalized slogan that appears several times throughout the 1960s and 1970s editions of *The Angolite* further drives this point home: “A Parolee is a tax payer. A Convict is a tax burden.” A reprinted article from *Weekly Progress* that compares Swedish and Canadian prisons to American penitentiaries in the September 1973 edition drives the economic/education/recidivism argument even further: “The general aim of Sweden is to use prisons as an experiment in the fields of education and democracy since recent studies showed that 66 percent of the adults – and 88 percent of the juveniles – had no form of professional training” (7). This article, when seen in light of Angola’s educational programs – or, the lack of them in any comprehensive sense – is reprinted as part of the staffers’ and contributors’ way of championing inmates as deserving of education and vocational skill training as a means of combating recidivism and the incredibly low levels of morale that plagued Louisiana State Penitentiary; by including the reprinted article, both inmate readers and outside supporters could

⁴¹ A passage from the “Brief Shots” section of the May/June 1976 issue offers an interesting continuation of such an argument: “The cost of keeping us locked up is proving awfully expensive to the taxpayer. The state legislature is being asked for \$113.8 million for corrections next year, \$45.8 million to operate the Department of Corrections and \$68 million to expand state prison facilities. And it doesn’t end there. There’s yet the cost of operating those new facilities soon to be constructed...and, of course, inflation will play its tricks with the cost of corrections...And it’s ridiculous. It is costing over \$5,000 a year to house an inmate at Angola and, according to State Budget Officer Ralph Perlman it will cost \$25,000 per inmate to construct new prison facilities. For what it is costing to keep a prisoner locked up, society would fare better sending him to college. It’s not only cheaper, but society would perhaps realize some returns from this awesome financial investment which, to date, has just been so much dead money, reaping only hate, crime, and violence” (8). Angela Davis, among others, articulates a similar argument against the current prison-industrial complex.

see alternatives to the status quo. Once again, *Angolite* staffers and contributors took their concerns about their community to the printed page – a more formal and understandable move than the riots that consumed Attica during that same decade.

The Memorial Area Vocational School based in New Roads, Louisiana (which offered training in auto mechanics, welding, cooking, air conditioning repair, and other trades) was in a similarly dire situation – one that would not change any time soon. A March/April *Angolite* article from 1977 describing a discussion session between selected inmates, prison staffers, and Warden Ross Maggio shows that while all parties wished for “more educational and vocational opportunities for the prisoners confined here at the state’s largest penal facility” (6), the same needs for educational staff and funding remained; Mason Green, principal for the Angola High School, “cited a definite need for education programs at Angola” (7). These claims, according to *The Angolite*, were met with deaf ears: “[W]hile Maggio and his staff urged improvement in many areas of benefit to the prisoners here, they strongly defended the existence of Angola and urged its perpetuation, something the prisoners opposed during the afternoon session” (7). Although the warden and his staff were clearly aware of the need for program expansion, they maintained their stance that Angola was “a very satisfactory part” (7) of the prison system. It is clear that many aspects of Angola had indeed changed for the better; between 1972 and 1975, 40 inmates were murdered while in custody and 350 were seriously wounded. But between 1976 and 1977, there were only two inmate killings. Still, the Commission made up of wardens and classification directors took no actions towards improvements (6).

Angola’s problems with education funding can also be found in other issues covered by *The Angolite*; a November/December 1978 article concerning the completed construction of Camp D “which has transformed Angola into the biggest penitentiary in the nation, creating what

is perhaps America's first prison megapolis" (16), shows a picture of a sparkling, brand new education facility: "The only wrinkle in Camp D's operations is in education. While the classrooms and equipment are ready, there are no teachers" (17). While this particular article does not elaborate much on the lack of teachers, the combination of this single, stark quote with a large photograph of the empty classrooms and empty desks conveys a striking message about inmate needs and the desire for reading and writing skills.

Although dozens of *Angolite* articles such as the ones presented above show the need for educational improvements – as well as the ability of inmate writers to clearly articulate such needs – some feature essays make the connection between education and state-imposed measurements of rehabilitation, as seen in the November/December 1982 *Angolite* essay "Rehabilitation: A Misguided Effort":

During the '60s and '70s when rehabilitation was in its [national] heyday, many inmates participated in an assortment of educational, vocational training, and therapeutic programs to establish that right 'mental attitude' in their records thereby increasing their chances of getting out of prison. Rehabilitation became a game the inmates were forced to play with a capricious and constantly changing system. They realized that the decision-making in the rehabilitation process really has nothing to do with merit, achievement, or fairness; that rehabilitation is more often measured by the inmate's ability to kiss ass than anything else. (39)

Such direct language is rare within the *Angolite* editions of the 70s and 80s. Yet the frustration is clearly warranted; while paroles did indeed occur at Angola in its earliest years and even in the 1970s, Louisiana State Penitentiary was moving towards its current state where the majority of prisoners were serving life or virtual life sentences. Furthermore, the paroles that were granted were few and far between. Although there could indeed be some truth to the assumption that inmates only participate in educational and rehabilitation programs to increase chances of parole, other articles that cover education issues are connected by a motif that does

not fit this particular purpose. As Green notes in his 1975 article that begins this section, “Education is the KEY to rehabilitation. With knowledge all things become possible; with knowledge comes the ability to cope better with the little problems that bother us, to understand ourselves and our brothers” (24).

The capitalization of “KEY” – a move that might seem insignificant to some readers – seems incredibly important in the context of *The Angolite*; analogies to keys, locks, and chains are used not only to describe their collective situation but also to explain the barriers that block inmates from using their time constructively while in prison. Scholars such as H. Bruce Franklin might argue that the rhetoric of “brotherhood” is especially appropriate for prison writers and allows them to draw upon discourses that are sensitive to class and caste distinctions and as a rallying cry against the systems that shape their collective existence. The language of unity and teamwork (“our brothers”) mark this and other articles about the role of education at LSP and other penal institutions as well. Such articles champion those inmates who have made the choice to pursue an education – to “let time serve them” – and encourages others who are struggling with their reading and writing courses.

Still, one could certainly argue that Green’s article is, in fact, a perfect illustration of the “ass kissing” that is criticized in “Rehabilitation: A Misguided Effort.” It is indeed possible that an inmate who writes in positive ways about education, rehabilitation, or collaboration – even when such writing offers implicit critiques of the larger institution of the prison – is engaged in performing an identity that plays up to the values held by the society that holds him prisoner. Although chances for parole from Angola were, and still are, quite slim, I could easily understand how such a performance over time might earn an inmate certain privileges – a less strenuous work-detail assignment, for example. While my discussion at this point is somewhat

speculative, I understand that an analysis of *Angolite* texts must account for a range of motives and effects. Yet the frequency of articles that discuss educational efforts and opportunities, along with the importance that the inmates I met during my field research placed on avenues for personal development and connection (such as fund-drives by the Lifers' Association or volunteer work with Angola Hospice) cause me to see the voices within the articles presented here as sincere.

While Green's article and others like it are geared to alert inmates to educational programs, they could also be read as a challenge to other inmates to take part in the few educational opportunities that existed. "Any man in this institution who has less than an 8th grade education and is not attending the academic or vocational school," Bill Brown argues in his April 1975 article "Education is IN," "is a man who is 'serving time!' The only thing that an inmate can accumulate while he is here that the authorities cannot take away from him when he leaves Angola is the education he received while incarcerated here..." (1). Brown notes that disciplinary infractions will keep inmates from being able to enroll in the academic or vocational education programs (which reinforces the administration's analogy of learning as privilege), but even here he offers a challenge: "if an inmate is sincere in wanting to go to school to get an education and not just to shirk work...he will simply go that length of time without a write-up" (1). A similar statement is made in an article collaboratively written by *The Angolite* staff in July 1971: "Since the inmate has to spend a certain amount of time in the institution, he would be showing a degree of intelligence by making time serve him instead of serving time" (4).

Brown concludes with a final charge:

The Education Department is not as well equipped with material or instructors as we would like it to be, but it has improved over the last couple of years and the future looks brighter...All it takes is a little desire on your part. Get off your backsides and sign up!

...You and I both know that if you don't do it now, you never will.
(1).

By incorporating fairly aggressive language, a tactic that is somewhat different from the more reasoned modes of argument in usual articles, Brown (and many of the other articles of varying lengths that encourage inmates to enroll in programs offered by the Education Department) takes on a voice that champions the same prison motto that is so often seen in the pages of *The Angolite*: "Don't serve time, let time serve you" (1). By writing his views in the official inmate news magazine and frequently contributing (mainly as a visual artist), he acts as an example of how reading and writing allow an inmate to become something more than simply another anonymous man doing time at Angola.

Perhaps one of the most emotionally moving *Angolite* pieces concerning education within LSP is simply titled "Graduation Day," published in the November/December 1984 issue. By this point in Angola's history, educational and vocational programming had improved since the days of Green's coverage, but the prison school still lacked resources and instructors (especially "reading specialists or basic first grade teachers" [41]) that would allow more inmates to be involved with formal literacy programs and G.E.D. curriculum. The writer of this piece alludes to such problems, yet contrasts these impediments to the achievements of the inmate-students that he describes:

The classroom was small and the ceremony being held in it was just as spare. There were no gowns, caps, officials, or any of the normal trappings that go with such events...It was, in the general scheme of things, relatively insignificant – except for the eight men standing in front of the classroom's blackboard...It was a milestone for them, the culmination of their individual efforts to educate themselves. (40)

The article moves from the sparse but celebrated nature of this event to the unique situation of inmate education at Angola. Again, like other articles, the low number of teachers (only seven at

this point) and the lack of materials are highlighted. Yet such problems are juxtaposed with images of hope: “The audience of a handful of students...sat quiet and attentive. They too hoped to one day stand before the class in simple ceremony to receive their diplomas” (40). While such an act will merely be followed by those same inmates returning to their prison-assigned jobs, it is easy to see how such a ceremony is an incredible mark of success in the context of the prison system as well as how *Angolite* articles position inmate-students as radically different than what we might expect: “As [Raymond] Coco [one of the instructors] points out, there are no security officers in the school areas to police the students, yet ‘We haven’t had one ounce of trouble with the students that I know of. I like to think that fact says a lot about the program, the teachers, and the students” (42).

As noted at the beginning of the article, “All education at the Louisiana State Penitentiary is voluntary...But many want to [attend school], far more than are able to attend, as a long waiting list attests to. Of the 5,200 inmates...only 180 are currently enrolled in the prison’s academic program” (40). These implicit appeals to outside, free readers are supported by heartbreaking profiles of the graduates. William Doucette, “serving time for robbery and manslaughter...had only a formal eighth-grade education when he joined the prison’s academic program” (41). Throughout this passage, his desire for self-improvement – to become something more than the label of his sentence or the number on his uniform – is placed at the forefront: “Determination...I wanted my G.E.D., so I made personal sacrifices and I did extensive studying on the side – thanks to Librarian Gary Long.” (41).

Another student, James Carney (“who killed a man in a New Orleans barroom brawl and has spent the last ten years here as a result” [42]), is described as something akin to a monastic scribe, “not wanting his imprisonment to be a total waste” (42). Carney, an inmate at the Main

Prison (as opposed to the outcamps, where opportunities for formal education are even fewer) had been enrolled in the program and progressing when the school was temporarily shut down for renovations; “He had to wait four years before he could rejoin the academic program” (42). Portrayed as one of the school’s success stories, Carney is also portrayed as making the best of his confinement, attending trade school “in his spare time” (42); “It doesn’t stop here...I intend to go farther, as far as I can” (42).

While a cynic might only see these accounts as sappy, feel-good stories that are drastically overshadowed by the immense levels of illiteracy within both Angola and our national prison system (or, more cynically, as manipulative texts deployed to play up to values held by administrators and those not held behind bars), the metaphors of transformation cannot be ignored. *Angolite* articles such as this one show a prison world where inmates are aware of their shortcomings and attempt to transcend their mistakes. Coco offers a statement that resonates with these collective hopes: “You see, they’re all dropouts, individuals who, for varying reasons or bad experiences they had when they attended school years ago, came to feel that they couldn’t learn; but once we show them that they can and, once they realize that...its not as impossible as they might have previously thought, they leap right into the process of learning” (42). Coco is shown as accepting these men “as students” (41) with individual hopes. This article recalls other pieces within *The Angolite* that profile teachers within the program, such as “Spotlight: The Education Department” in the May/June 1976 issue. In that piece, collaboratively written by four inmates including George “Ashanti” Witherspoon (a now-freed inmate featured in the documentary *The Farm* almost twenty years after this article’s publication), the teachers employed by the education program are portrayed as inspiring pedagogues: “We try to get a student to succeed by showing him that he can succeed...I feel that

the public needs to know and be taught what I've been taught here...There is a great need to educate the public because, regardless of a prisoner's education, the public will continue to see him as an ex-con" (26). But even in these pages of praise, where *Angolite* writers show both the inmate world and the free world that there are inmates working towards composing a life away from crime, the difficulties of inmate education are also highlighted: "Despite the progress of the Education Department," the article concludes, "there are problems...a lack of needed educational material and funds for expansion. It was due to the termination of a federal grant that the drafting class had to be shut down...However, there is still hope..." (30).

Hopes, keys, dreams, worth, value, ability, goals... These tropes are woven throughout representations of inmates as students within the pages of *The Angolite*. Because *The Angolite* is circulated throughout LSP, other inmates have a chance to see their fellow men represented as successes, as learners, as someone that shines despite the harsh conditions of the prison and the numbing anonymity imposed on inmates via the public sphere and popular media. In a place that is often discussed by inmates as hopeless, such accounts have an amazing power of testimony – an altar call of sorts to the life of the mind. Accounts such as Miller's take a logos-based approach and argue – from an inmate's perspective as opposed to that of a trained criminologist or a social scientist – that education can counter recidivism, a connection that is often revisited by *Angolite* articles. Other pieces, such as those that profile inmate students and even G.E.D. graduates, work as a way of providing a counter-narrative that departs from discussions of inmates as irredeemable, worthless, and illiterate.

While challenges remain in inmate education – a topic discussed in both Chapter Three and in the second interchapter of this study – these representations might be seen as an open letter to the free world, a letter that, like Poma's document that is the center of Pratt's study,

attempts to enter a dialogue and challenge stereotypes. Perhaps more importantly for the inmates involved, in light of Wilson and other prison ethnographers and literacy scholars, the pursuit of reading and writing abilities allows inmates to create something that is their own. Taking part in educational programs – and writing about such programs for an audience of both one’s peers and captors – gives inmates a way to make the span of their prison sentences more than just a deadening count of days. These men attempt to use literacy as a way to combat the numbness of isolation, of despair, of hopelessness. The daily practice of literacy makes their lives different and more meaningful. As noted by Robert Adam Raia, a Camp J inmate who contributes a short piece to the November/December 1984 issue, “The need to survive prison is not the only need of the people, but also of the human spirit – a spirit that demands self-expression” (75).

Strength in Numbers: Discussions of Collaboration

Unfolding at this precise moment is an exciting chapter in the history of Angola, a beam of light disturbing old darkness. Around us we finally see, if we but open our eyes, that progress is reaching back for us...we can feel that life is stealing its way into the sluggish body of Angola. And does it strike you that much of this current chapter is taking form at the hand of prisoners themselves? (1).

This passage begins Frank Bagala’s January 1973 article, “Summary: Federally Supervised Prisoner Management Talks.” While the previous section showed how *Angolite* staffers and contributors discussed issues of education to audiences that exist both inside and outside the prison system, Bagala’s article shows one of the crucial moments where Angola inmates had to work together, discuss ideas, reflect, and compromise with both their own ranks as well as authority figures to help improve their collective situation. Such tactics – teamwork, creative thinking, and collaboration – can easily be seen as a complex cognitive and literate practice. Ellen Cushman’s *The Struggle and The Tools* traces a working-class urban black

community that has to find ways of dealing with authority figures via discussion and reflection, and one can find similar literacy practices in not only the actual text of *The Angolite* but in the events that it covers. We will see Angola inmates working together to help themselves and their own situation in this section, but we will also take note of some moments where inmates are shown as working collectively to help others outside the prison system – acts that allow such inmates to feel at least a tiny connection to the world beyond Angola’s gates. By explaining itself to the outside world, such moments recall Pratt’s discussions and portray a community that is somewhat different than what many might think of them.

Placed at the front of the issue, Bagala’s article reads as an open letter to inmates who are (understandably) skeptical of possible changes in policy, treatment, or even the ability for inmates to successfully represent themselves to authorities. Bagala reports on a two-day discussion panel composed of inmate representatives, Angola administrators, and federal officials in the wake of the federal mandate to rid Angola of violence. While Angola would be a horrific, brutal space for years to come, such a cooperative of inmates and freemen was unheard of in the entire history of Louisiana State Penitentiary. Surprisingly, Bagala argues, “The Department of Corrections, represented at talks by the Director, our wardens and the Chief of Security, more often than not accepted our recommendations” (1). As a writer and member of the representative team, he recognizes physical challenges (“Do you realize how difficult it is to attract qualified personnel to this isolated piece of wilderness?” [2]), political and economic restraints (“Facilities and personal services are purchased with money; money is appropriated by the legislature; the legislature does what the public says; and the public doesn’t give a damn about us... [2]), and the risks of riot as a display of discontent (“Not only do we consume time and energy by rioting, but we change the whole issue. Where we had caused attention to focus

on inhumane prison conditions, we divert that attention to the riot itself... We must make our own appeal to public support. [2]). The use of first person and direct interrogation reveals that Bagala is writing to his fellow inmates and reporting on a situation that all would find crucial to their daily lives behind bars. The hard language – that the public doesn’t give a damn – connects to the rage and frustration that is understandably part of the world of the prison.

But what is most surprising here is the level of reflexivity and reflection that Bagala describes as part of the inmate-representatives collective strategy: “At the outset, we introduced an agenda designed to promote the kind of conversation that would reveal the positions of both teams. We wanted to know if our opinions so antagonized each other that nothing meaningful could come out of these talks” (2). By noting such considerations, Bagala not only justifies the work of the inmate representatives to the committee but also makes a case as an ethical thinker and writer to the free world *Angolite* audience that was slowly growing (again, as can be seen via letters to the editor; see also Morris, Chapter 16). The wide range of concerns – from visitation privileges to restrictions of self-expression such as writing and painting to “arbitrary” punishments (3) to the horrific nature of the Red Hat cellblocks (an isolation facility that I described in Chapter One that is now, ironically, a historic landmark) and the need for better sanitation, especially in lockdown conditions – shows the need for careful, reflective consideration and discussion, a need that is clearly shown to both inside and outside readers via Bagala’s account: “We found ourselves involved in the erection of a part of the system under which we would be governed. That is how it should be” (3).

These discussions of inmate-authority debate and discussion recall much of Pratt’s careful analysis of Incan-Spanish relations as seen in Poma’s letter. Poma calls for a collaborative government comprised of both Incas and Spaniards and concludes with a quasi-

Platonic dialogue imagined between King Philip III and Poma himself that crosses both a physical divide of space and a rhetorical divide of power and language that centers on questions of empire. Pratt claims a sort of pyrrhic victory for Poma: “In a way, [the letter] worked – this extraordinary text did get written – but in a way, it did not, for the letter never reached its addressee” (36); *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* was lost to antiquity and re-discovered – almost on accident – in the Danish Royal Archive in 1908. “No one, it appeared,” Pratt states, “had bothered to read it or figured out how” (34). Such risk and futility seems right at home with the work of all inmate journalists. Bagala’s article, like many *Angolite* feature pieces during the 1970s and 1980s, reflects a desperate sense of frustration despite the changes that were taking place: “Angola is still worlds away from the type of correctional facility that should exist in this day and age” (2). Whether or not Poma’s letter made a difference isn’t Pratt’s main point here; instead, she is concerned with how Poma uses language to resist dominant representations and to appeal for his people’s needs as human beings.

Another article of note that positions inmates at Angola as not only capable but also perhaps even highly skilled at collaboration involves the desegregation process that began in late 1973. Billy Wayne Sinclair, the future co-editor of *The Angolite*, states in his article, “The Negotiators,” (August 1973) that “Most prisoners deeply resented the fact that integration (or anything else) would be forced upon them by either the Justice Department or the Administration” (1). The current Warden, C. Murray Henderson, asked “all the heads of various prison organizations and some independent prison leaders” (1) to aid in the integration process as a negotiation committee; the success of desegregation, measured by a body count, would rest in their hands. Sinclair, in covering the activities, argues that “This proved to be the most decisive decision made in the integration plan” (1), as inmates would have representatives to speak their

grievances. A top-down decision with no inmate input could only lead to more violence and racial hatred: “there is a broad cultural gap between black and white prisoners which served to create acute anxiety among many” (1). This committee would be the first time that black and white inmates at Angola would meet face to face to discuss problems and, hopefully, prevent race-based murders.

Instead of relying on the “grapevine” (1) to spread word of the imminent desegregation (and, later, Warden C. Paul Phelps would comment on how *The Angolite* helped quell problems in such a place typically ruled by rumor), *The Angolite* shows how this team of inmates determined among themselves how best to achieve their goals. While details are few, we are shown the difficulties the committee faced in their meetings: “At first the integration plan seemed destined for failure. Black and white leaders had an extremely difficult time establishing an understanding with their own people. Proposals and solutions were rampant...There were moments when disgust, anger, and futility plagued the leaders; yet they refused to relent” (1).

Once decisions were finalized, the medium and minimum yards were completely integrated in one week: “The move was quiet and calmly accepted by the prisoners. Most prisoners find the integrated solution better than the segregated one” (2). Sinclair attributes this success to the fact that inmates were involved with the desegregation process, where inmates and administration worked together despite differences. “And for the first time in Angola’s history,” Sinclair concludes, “black and white prisoners possess a sense of unity and togetherness. Angola is definitely faced with a new definition” (2).

Angolite staff member Tommy Mason contributed a lengthy piece to the May/June 1976 issue that covered the election process for a newly formed grievance committee that would offer a semblance of representation of inmate concerns to the administration. When considering the

history of Angola – or even some of the horrors described about even this era of Angola prison – it is hard to imagine inmates with the right to choose, at least to a certain degree, leaders from their own ranks in an official, sanctioned practice. Mason does indeed report moments of skepticism on the part of the inmate population (“Here and there, idle talk circulated that the Administration was up to its old tricks again, but acting as if they didn’t know what kind of cynicism they were up against...” [13]; “There was even mention that the elections were just a hoax, and nothing would really come of them” [17]), but he makes it a point to show how much the process of selecting representatives – a highly literate, thoughtful practice – meant to the inmate population:

Inmates could be seen working to gather votes for the candidate of their choice. One inmate after spending a fruitless effort talking to a group of inmates playing cards frustratedly exclaimed, ‘You always get a few who don’t want to take part...they just don’t realize how important this really is...’ (16).

Another inmate, Ronnie Burnnette, is quoted as stating, “I think it’s really important that we get this thing going, and I think they’re going about it the right way” (17).

As Mason reports, “Almost all of the men took part in the elections” (16), despite the doubts shown by some members of the inmate community. The article detailed images of the inmates talking about the process, the candidates, and how this process of self-selection – a process that seems counter to what we might believe about inmate life during this dark decade of penal life, especially at Angola – was seen as a valuable activity by both inmates and officers alike. Mason also details the system that facilitates this election – one of the first of its kind in the history of Angola – a fair process: “One interesting fact...[was] that no votes could be tallied unless an inmate was present to assist” (15) – a presence that was validated by his signature on the ballot as a counter. Classification officers were also present throughout the voting and

counting process, which Mason praises: “Both the inmates and the Administration deserve a pat on the back...Both handled themselves quite well...As for the grievance committee and the new breed, rest assured that we will be watching” (17). This final statement reinforces how *The Angolite* – as in its statements encouraging education reforms as well as supporting inmates who take part in formal schooling or vocational programs – often positions itself as the ethical watchdog of the Angola community.

Of course, as I have already noted, there are other possible readings of this article and those like it within this section. Is the “we” that is mentioned here actually a collaboration between these writers and their captors that can surveil other prisoners? Might the elections simply reinforce prisoner hierarchies? And who is to say that the inmate in charge of observing the voting and tallying isn’t in cahoots with an inmate clique or a particular administrator? I do not mean to undercut my own reading of these texts by noting other possible speculations, but the sheer complexity of any text in terms of motive and meaning begs such alternative and perhaps more cynical readings. But, again, even these less-community centered readings are prompted by a text that attempts to create and communicate an identity. Mason’s article, like so many others within the pages of this publication, can certainly be read as an account a community working together despite doubt and anxiety to both inmate readers and those outside of Angola’s community.

Angolite articles throughout the 1970s and 1980s as well as current issues typically dedicate pages and even whole sections reporting on the activities of inmate groups. Some of these groups are connected to activities in the free world, such as the Angola Jaycees – one of the longest running inmate collectives at Louisiana State Penitentiary; as seen in a January 1973 report, contributor William H. Brown describes this particular group as “a living organization

that is designed to motivate others along the avenues of self-improvement” (16).⁴² Others, such as the Lifer’s Association – a group that many current *Angolite* staffers belong to – or Veterans Incarcerated, exist without explicit support from the outside world (although such groups are indeed looked favorably upon by wardens and administrative staff). Some articles discuss the account activities of the Inmate Lending Fund, an inmate-organized “community chest” (June 1971, 11) that “does not belong to the state nor is supported by the state in any way financially” (11) and is used as a lending fund for inmate organizations and even for the costs of individual pardon board applications.⁴³ One could also argue that the large number of inmates involved with recreational sports – an activity that is typically one of the most appreciated sections of *The Angolite* by inmate readers and one that allows inmates to be recognized by their fellow inmates for successes on the field and as leaders – could also constitute as an inmate-self help group.⁴⁴

Inmate groups are presented as offering a helping hand to their fellow brothers – a stark contrast to stories of contraband weaponry, race-based violence, or even acts of inmate rape (the latter of these will be analyzed in the next chapter); for example, a short piece in the January/February 1976 issue by contributor Kenneth “Biggie” Johnston describes a public speaking class offered by the Human Relations Club, an inmate organization that still exists today as one of the many outreach groups made up of inmates at LSP. Johnston describes the organization as “one of the most progressive prisoner organizations existing on the river” (21). His article discusses the contents of the course (“designed to teach the techniques of public

⁴² Often, *The Angolite* reports on the massive numbers of awards and recognitions that the Angola Jaycees has earned over the years. See June/July 1973, 14 for an example.

⁴³ According to another article from August 1971, the Inmate Lending Fund offered aid to such groups as the Angola Alcoholics Anonymous Chapter, Narcotics Anonymous, and various intramural sports teams. Donations, as opposed to loans, were also made to the American Cancer Society and to aid with inmate funeral costs (8).

⁴⁴ Interestingly, *Angolite* issues have, at times, included official directives and documents from the administration concerning the rules the govern inmate groups; see August 1971, 2.

speaking and the art of meaningful human relations...demanding active participation by the students” [21]) as well as the ceremony that rewards graduates for their accomplishment (“with each student rendering a prepared speech before the families of club members and distinguished guests...the occasion is not only competitive but inspiring and entertaining. After graduation, the students officially become members of the Human Relations Club” [21]).⁴⁵

Often, *The Angolite* shows how such groups or even the penitentiary as a whole works together to help people on the outside. An inspiring example of this practice is the article “A Rose is a Rose” from the Jan/Feb 1984 issue: “For the second consecutive year, the inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary donated money to the Salvation Army’s toys-for-the-needy fund...[Inmates] raised \$2,455 and two days before Christmas Deputy Warden Marty Lensing delivered the check to Major B. T. Lewis” (13). This amount of money might seem quite small, but when compared to how little inmates made in their various assigned jobs, “it was truly a remarkable gesture of goodwill” (13).

While narrating the events of the charity fund raiser, the piece also takes issue with how rarely inmates are portrayed as attempting to help others (both inside and outside the prison) – a direct attack on the totalizing discourse of crime, a move that seems right at home with Pratt’s discussions of the arts of the contact zone:

We understand that there are some in society who find it hard to accept the fact that we are fed, clothed, and housed in a humane manner. Left up to them, Angola would be a Russian Siberia and they would be all the happier for it. Undoubtedly, there are some mean and terrible men in prison and they were put there to protect society from their predatory behavior. But there are some good men in prison as well – those at Angola who gave up their hard-

⁴⁵ During the 1970s, as noted in several *Angolite* articles (for example, see August 1971, 5), the Dale Carnegie Club was quite popular with inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary. The purpose of the club, as noted in one article, is “to show you how to speak publicly and keep the attention of your audience” (5). The emphasis on public speaking seems interesting in light of low education levels within the prison and the obvious lack of opportunities for inmates at this time to address outsiders.

earned money to needy children and those in New Orleans who helped repair homes for the elderly. (14)

The writer of this piece shows a clear understanding of the almost impenetrable belief system that contains the prison population almost as much as physical bindings such as handcuffs, cells, and gates: “While other groups were given recognition for their various gestures of goodwill...the inmates were virtually ignored” (13) – an act that this article means to challenge. “No single inmate wanted recognition,” the argument continues: “Instead, the inmates as a whole simply wanted to be recognized as a group of people who can be as decent and caring as other people. Inmates get enough bad press...as being a mean, terrible and callous lot deserving absolutely nothing from society. That’s popular hardware to sell...But it’s not good hardware; it’s the hardware of vengeance...” (13).⁴⁶

Representations of inmates in the process of working together do not only come from discussions of organizational activities or negotiation reports. One of Wilbert Rideau’s earliest contributions to *The Angolite* as a staff reporter in March 1975 offers some insight as to one of the guiding principles of the publication – not only as it was radically changing (“...breaking out for new frontiers, for something better, more realistic and meaningful” as Rideau would note in a “Getting it Together” editorial from March/April 1979 that reflects on this period) but as a whole, in light of its roots from the 1950’s. While this particular article, on one level, simply

⁴⁶ This article is one of several *Angolite* pieces that narrate acts of generosity offered by the inmate community to the outside world. Another short piece that is quite interesting, considering the rich musical history of Louisiana and even Angola prison, is “Operation Friendship” from April 1973. Envisioned and enacted entirely by inmates with permission from the administration, “The main purpose of this project is to take entertainment” – in the form of a seven-piece rock band – “to the patients of the U. S. Public Health Service Hospital at Carville, LA” (2). Another self-help group with musical interests, The S.E.A. (Social, Education, and Athletic) Club, is chronicled in the May 1973 issue; its conclusion, despite its apparent humor, is fairly harrowing: “Until the next issue of the *Angolite*, leave your blood at the Blood Bank and not on the walk!” (8). An October 1974 piece by Wilbert Rideau reports on how the Lifers’ Association sponsored a rock concert for inmates; tracing the appeals the inmate group made to various Angola superintendents, wardens, and even the Director of Corrections for Louisiana, he shows how this event is just one of the many activities sponsored by the Lifers’ Association, “a group of men serving life sentences involved in efforts to better themselves and their condition in life” (21). Major Richard A. Wall is cited as stating that, “the cooperation between inmates and officers represents a move to tearing down the longstanding barriers barring meaningful communication” (22).

narrates a specific act – a fire that broke out in Cell Block D – it also shows a critical understanding on behalf of both the writer and the larger staff of issues of stratification that mark and divide the prison as a system: “There is always that invisible line,” Rideau argues, “that separates the powerful from the powerless, rendering aliens to each other” (1).

Rideau describes how a prisoner, “enroute [sic] to a church service,” noticed a fire in an Administrative Lockdown Section: “The lower left tier of the cellblock...was so filled with smoke that he could see absolutely nothing through the windows” (1). Knowing that this section would be filled with inmates – behind locked doors, of course, with no way of escape from the growing flames – the prisoner alerted the guards who quickly realized that the doors were jammed. With no time to call prison welding shop to obtain cutting torches, Rideau reports how inmates “began breaking windows the entire length of the building” (1) while the Medium Yard inmates – separated from the scene by a fence – observed the situation in fear. Others raced to the prison hospital for stretchers and oxygen tanks, with “tears running down some of the hardest faces imaginable, as if it were the most natural thing in the world” (1). His description of the billowing smoke and the prisoners trapped inside is truly harrowing and indicative of his emotive and captivating prose style.

At this moment in the narrative, before reporting on the hospitalization of the victims and the source of the fire (“a stack of mattresses...gone undetected by personnel on duty”) Rideau turns from description to analysis – a move that, again, not only comments on this specific account but also implicitly highlights the overall purpose of *The Angolite*:

And, in that moment, all of those petty class lines that we drew in daily life to separate us from each other were forgotten. Old hates, class distinctions, and racial and religious differences took flight. There were only human beings and a sense of desperation at their inability to do something to help...(4)

Read out of context, such a moment seems idealistic at best; in a place characterized by division – between inmates and “freemen,” between prisoners and the world that they are exiled from, between races and gang affiliations, divided not only by administrators into camps and cell blocks but also self-divided into warring factions and cliques – Rideau’s commentary is easily trumped by overwhelming despair. Rideau also leaves out certain obvious questions: who set the fire? Was it an accident? Fires set by inmates have a long standing history as a method of disruption (a history that is often used in filmic representations of maximum-security prison life such as the end of Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*), yet Rideau refuses to play the role of the “snitch” – an understandable tactic, considering the perilous situation of any inmate at Angola, especially one with the power of the pen and a recognizable position within the population of Louisiana State Penitentiary.

What makes this small article interesting is the fact that, instead of offering a simplistic and clichéd picture of community, Rideau takes the long-term power of such division and despair into account: “The crisis over, everyone went their separate ways, resuming their former roles: white and black, powerful and powerless, guard and prisoner, friends and enemies, and so on. The class lines returned, making a mockery out of our brief experience in brotherhood...and therein laid the tragedy” (4). Within the confines of a simple news report, Rideau finds a way to engage what he sees as the real “tragedy”: the “invisible lines” (both self-imposed and enforced by others) that divide a population forced to co-exist. *The Angolite*, especially during the 1970’s when the prison was under national scrutiny for its history of corruption and violence, attempts to represent the concerns of the inmates at Angola as a collective unit while recognizing the difficult relations between factions as well as between prisoners and administration.

“Difficult” might be too kind a word when describing the occasional letters from Angola inmate readers who disagree with *Angolite* coverage and reporting. Inmate #80271 Leo Jackson, in a letter to *The Angolite* in response to a July/August article concerning the reforms and changes at Camp J (one of the outcamps placed away from the main prison complex and used for solitary confinement), offers a rage-filled letter – a rant of sorts – that critiques the success of *The Angolite* as a news publication:

You boast of having unlimited freedom of expression in your publication but yet your articles tend to almost always circumvent the stinking reality of life here at Angola! It’s a shame too, because we depend on you to tell the public the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. (4)

There are several ways to read this situation. On one hand, the fact that *The Angolite* publishes such a letter not only reflects the staff’s long-term desire to use their publication as a means of dialogue but also contributes to their role as journalists as opposed to mere reactionaries. *The Angolite*’s response combines the language of the cell blocks and outcamps with the ethical, reserved language that *The Angolite* is typically known for: “We’re sure that, from your Camp J perspective, reality does stink. However, reality is reality, and it doesn’t cater to vested interests – whether it’s Camp J or the Administration. We are in the fact-gathering business and we try to report it as fairly and objectively as circumstances will permit” (4).⁴⁷

Again, an alternative reading of this exchange might emphasize how *The Angolite* has most of the power here. One could argue that the staff controls which letters get published or get

⁴⁷ Another letter from that same issue uses even stronger, more aggressive language that is worth noting here: “Because I’ve found that opinions are always up for someone’s contradiction and that there is always another view to be considered, I’ve never bothered to offer any rebuttal concerning any particular article of the ‘Angolite;’ plus it is easy to see the means necessary to make the ‘Angolite’ acceptable to prisoners, authorities, and readers. Until recently, I found the ‘Angolite’ a bit of a pacifist for all and an object of controversy by all, but now the standards seem to cater toward institutional penology and the reality within this miserable place is being omitted!! Although all won’t agree, this person’s opinion is that the directive of the ‘Angolite’ at present is a bunch of crap!!!” – Charlie Watts #85764/C.C.R.; Louisiana State Prison, Angola (Sept/Oct 1980, 3).

sent to the slush pile and that, as practiced writers, they have more access to the type of reserved, ethical language that holds currency among administrators and outside readers. In exchanges of this type, *The Angolite* gets the final say; this letter writer is essentially muted and has no chance to respond publicly in this forum. Institutions in power, as we know, often allow such small protests as a way of perpetuating an illusion of freedom, and one could certainly position *The Angolite* as a powerful force in the world of Angola.

By recognizing and analyzing differences, staff writers such as Rideau provide an account that is neither idealistic and romanticized nor dogmatic and totalizing. As argued in Chapter 1, *Angolite* staffers throughout the years (although especially during the 1970's until the current issues) write against the totalizing force of the prison that positions prisoners as a large but anonymous presence that is completely contained and exiled. Instead, such writers use their exile as a position from which to compose their own accounts and histories as well as critique the system that defines their daily life. And, as we have seen here, *Angolite* writers position themselves as able to validate acts where inmates work together and with authority figures to not only improve (or even simply try to improve) their own community but also help those in need beyond the walls of the penitentiary – even when such acts are not recognized by public media.

These collaborative events are enacted as a shield against the isolation that is a part of the prison experience; while prison – especially one as physically removed as Angola – can certainly feel as remote as “Siberia” as the anonymous writer of one of the articles in this section argues, small acts of collaboration allow inmates to feel at least somewhat useful and connected to a larger community. One might speculate that such a lack of connection to the greater needs of a community is a partial impetus for the crimes that led them to a life behind bars. Again, their participation does not change their criminal status, but it does, as these narratives show, provide

a productive way to live out a prison sentence. These moments show a community of *others* in the process of explaining itself to others via the practices of publication.

A Space of (almost) One's Own:
the Prison Library as Sanctuary

It might seem strange to transition from discussions of education and collaboration to an examination of a particular prison space. Yet a library, from an inmate's point of view, seems to be one of the most important spaces within the larger space of the prison. In terms of *The Angolite*, other spaces such as cell blocks and various dorms (where medium security and trustee inmates live) are indeed given coverage. The rodeo facility, as I argued in Chapter One, is also given special attention because of its potential for revenue and the fact that few other contemporary prisons allow for such an event. And as I noted in this chapter, spaces set aside for educational purposes are often discussed as a part of the larger conversation about inmate needs. But a library is a far different space than the places where inmates live and sleep or work their assigned jobs (such as the mattress plant or the print shop or the farm). It is also different than other spaces where inmates congregate, such as the Walk or the athletic facilities. In many *Angolite* articles, the library is shown as a distinct and necessary component in the process of transformation. It is positioned as a space for contemplation, a temporary escape from the loud and often hostile world of the prison, as a social area for inmates, and even as something akin to a sanctuary. In this section, I analyze how the inmate-library is typically represented in *The Angolite*. While the majority of these articles reflect how the inmates see this space as crucial to their mental and emotional survival and offer appeals to the outside world for support, we will also see how *The Angolite* reacts at a moment of crisis when this important space is withheld from the inmate population.

While there are few academic studies of prison libraries – a gap in scholarship that certainly needs attention – it is clear that such spaces hold incredible value for inmates; Larry E. Sullivan, in his “Reading in American Prisons: Structures and Strictures,” notes that while inmates do not have an easy method of physical escape, they often use reading as a form of mental escape. In his history of penal libraries, he argues the importance of “reading as a weapon” (117) against the despair that is often a product of imprisonment. Via an analysis of official prison library records and other documents, Sullivan shows how these libraries have radically different meanings for inmates and penal administrators: “Reformers, prison officials, and convicts all strive for the moral and behavioral improvement of prisoners, but the definition of improvement is very different among the constituencies of the carceral world. The keeper uses literature to control, the kept to resist” (114).⁴⁸

The Angolite’s coverage of the Louisiana State Penitentiary Prison Library can be read as a construction of a space that works against the numbing, totalizing discourse of prison as place as well as the documentation of a site where the *process* of transformation often begins and/or takes place. *Angolite* articles that discuss the library have a range of audiences. Although the shorter *Angolite* pieces of the 1950s and 1960s were explicitly geared toward LSP inmate readers, concerning updates as to changing library hours or an “appeal to your sense of ‘fair play’ and your higher intellect” to return books on time (September 30, 1968, 25) or even reporting lists of new titles (a practice that continued into the decades we are concerned with in this section, with short library updates in the occasional “Library News” column or the more regularly appearing “News Briefs” section), the more developed pieces that describe and narrate

⁴⁸ An issue of *Education Libraries* published a group of articles in 2000 that offered discussions from both prison librarians and inmate patrons. While Lehmann offers critical background information on the development and management of prison libraries and Singer outlines the differences between inmate-oriented and free-world libraries, four inmate writers offer accounts concerning the importance of the library as a spatial construction that are quite similar to *Angolite* articles discussed in this section. See *Education Libraries*. 24.1.

this space during the 1970s and 1980s seem to also be for outsider, free readers to both challenge perceptions of inmates and appeal for aid. Again, while *The Angolite* goes to great lengths to cover other spaces inside Angola, such as historical spaces like the infamous Red Hat barracks or the administrative-segregation area for violent inmates known as Camp J or the thousands of acres of fertile farmland where the majority of inmates work, their reports and profiles of the library reflect the importance of this space to the inmate population. But inmates alone could not construct such a space.

A November 1972 article by contributor Willie Caston profiles two women that championed the Angola library and reading behind bars: “Quite often a man visiting the library will pick up a magazine, paperback, or hardcover book and find written on the cover or flyleaf: “Polly and Peggy.” This is usually followed by a curious stare” (5). Such a relatively anonymous act of generosity is represented as almost unbelievable throughout the article: “As the shipments began to arrive men speculated: Who are Peggy and Polly? And what personal motives can they have in this? None? Impossible!” (5). According to Caston, Polly Kierstead and Peggy Narengo had simply sent a letter to Angola in the spring of 1972: “We have some books that we would like to donate to your library. Please let us know what kind of books you would like to receive” (5). Another letter, arriving with the first shipment of books and magazines, states, “You may be interested to know that we are now servicing 132 libraries all over the U.S.” (5).

Articles about library contributors, while obviously published as a means of thanks and support much like *The Angolite*’s profiles of inmate teachers, implicitly show library needs and the lack of continued federal or state support: “...this is not an operation supported or subsidized by anyone, but that they operate with their own resources and faith alone. Reading materials and

books are solicited from schools, book stores, distributors, libraries, and private donors. The cost of postage, mailing materials...are borne solely by them” (18). Described as “unselfish and unpublicized” and “remarkable,” Caston uses this moment to profile Polly and Peggy, describing them as “Pushers for Brotherhood” (18). This move is reminiscent of Poma who, in the second half of his letter to King Phillip III, *Good Government and Justice*, “praises good works, Christian habits, and just men where he finds them” (611). In a sense, articles such as this one that narrate and champion library patronage are like the articles discussed in the previous section that offer coverage of inmate collaboration; they are attempts to connect with the outside world – to not only appeal for their help, but also to show that inmates are human and, like all of us, desire some sort of meaningful contact.

Other articles draw close attention to how the library is “set apart” from other areas of the prison. The September/October issue from 1977 introduces the library with details that radically depart from typical descriptions of prison spaces:

Walk in. It’s air-conditioned. Aretha Franklin wails in the background on an eight-track tape player. It doesn’t look like the dorms – that place where the eyes of hopelessness aimlessly stare into the darkness: where dignity slips through the night...swallowed up by a shutter of nothingness...A place removed from those faces down The Walk made weary by a repetition of boredom. (31)

The contrasts offered here highlight both the imposing nature of the majority of the spaces where inmates typically spent their time and the comparative benefits offered by the prison library, as the title of the piece notes, as “A Cool Place to Be.” The anonymous writer of this piece – perhaps Rideau or Sinclair or reporters Robert Robinson or Jake Rattler – begins with the assumption that many inmates (and free-readers as well) were not aware that a library even existed within the confines of Louisiana State Penitentiary: “Yes, there is a library in this

prison. We've had one since 1959. At that time it was just a prisoner rolling a wobbly cart down The Walk calling 'library' in a dull, monotonous voice" (31). Like many *Angolite* articles published in the wake of desegregation and the Federal mandate to reform Angola, this piece reflects changes and developments that are in sharp contrast to the violent practices during the majority of Angola's history as a state prison – practices thoroughly documented by Carleton's study as well as popular media reports (see Chapter One). The writer of this piece recognizes such violence and traces how it affected the space that he appeals for:

In this place where only time lasts forever, not many librarians lasted very long on the job. One stayed a week – another made it through a year. One librarian had his place hit by midnight burglars...And during the year the library was closed, it was turned into a trickhouse by the prisoners – one that would have sent Anita Bryant's understanding into an irretrievable orbit. (31)⁴⁹

Here, *The Angolite* positions itself as a judge of inmate behavior; those inmates who continue to violate laws and "spoil the orchard" – to use an old southern term – ruin the possibilities of privileges and opportunities for the larger body of inmates at LSP. We will see this rhetorical positioning several times in *Angolite* discussions of the prison library; writers who deal with this subject not only appeal to authorities for funding and resources but also plead to other inmates to respect such spaces and those who provide them. Like the other articles in this chapter that concern education and collaboration, *Angolite* writers urge the fellow inmates to take advantage of the few opportunities available for inmates. Directed at both inmates and free readers, *Angolite* articles seem to fit another aspect of Pratt's understanding of how autoethnographic texts, "are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speakers'

⁴⁹ In my close reading of the available *Angolite* editions in Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial Library (a nearly complete set that extends from 1953 until 2004), I could not find a single article that documents the year mentioned in this passage when the library was closed.

own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate. Such texts often constitute a marginalized groups' point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture" (35).

But more than just functioning as an example of Pratt's theoretical lens, articles such as this one show inmates in the process of transformation: "A serious little dude is kicked back in a chair...A book is in his lap. His mind, absorbed in the book, cannot begin to understand the murderous entrapment known in a caged life. But his mind easily understands this quiet, uncrowded place" (31). The library, therefore, offers the inmate a place of refuge; like Sullivan's commentary at the beginning of this section, the inmate can use reading to temporarily escape "the caged life." This same article also foregrounds philanthropy; the LSP library, while strapped for funding, donated books and magazines to various youth centers as well as to the women's prison at St. Gabriel (31). The inmates can reach to the library for benefits such as temporary shelter from the chaos of prison. The library, and the inmates who work there, can, in turn, reach out and help other inmate libraries – a series of connections that leaves everyone involved feeling a bit more human.

The LSP library is further chronicled in a May/June 1985 *Angolite* article that continues its representation as an alternative to the stresses of prison life. Librarian Gary Long (not an inmate but rather a professional librarian hired by the prison at the request of inmates to improve the library [32]) describes the space as "not anything like prison movies depict. There is a camaraderie and a casualness that would be appropriate on a college campus – not just between the inmates, but also between inmates and personnel in a surprising number of cases and circumstances" (32-33). The article also profiles three inmate-librarians. Terrance Marks, a former death-row inmate, is portrayed as a successful record-keeper and clerk who attends educational programs. William Ollis "sought a job in the library as a part of a journey towards

self-improvement and self-education” (33). Carl Williams, confined to a wheelchair, describes his work as incredibly meaningful and a way to contribute to the inmate community despite his physical limitations. The photographs of these inmate-librarians helping inmates with searches further drives the argument as to their personal renewal. Again, all of these are narratives of men who seek to improve the quality of their own lives via literacy work in a space that is represented as life affirming:

In addition to being a source of reading material, the library had been a kind of oasis in the prison world – a nice place where the inmates could go to get away from the noise of the dormitory, the routine of doing time, and the pressures of ongoing prison games. Inmates gravitated to it as a social watering hole, as an opportunity to relax and listen to soothing music, read, play chess...(34-35)

Like other articles about the library, difficulties such as funding are highlighted along with these profiles as a means of appeal; as I noted in the introductory chapter to my study, *The Angolite*’s popularity with outside readers increased dramatically in the 1980s, and it is clear that articles during this era are at least partially designed to increase outside funding: “The prison has never spent much money on the library, apart from the salary of the librarian” (35). Articles such as this one show how the Inmate Welfare Fund (another pool of money raised by the inmates themselves via collaboration) provided funds for newspapers and magazines and how local colleges and public libraries have donated materials. Still, like the aforementioned Polly and Peggy, the library was (and still is) mostly championed by “ordinary people who just call up and want to donate books they happen to have” (37).

The articles I have discussed so far are just a few examples of how this space is represented in *Angolite* articles as a place that is set apart from the rest of the prison. While games and music might not be considered the typical fare in public or academic libraries in the free world, such elements seem to make sense considering the larger space of the prison. The

professional librarians as well as the inmate-library staff are keenly aware of their clients' needs; there are no other spaces in a typical prison that offer opportunities for both social and literacy interaction. *Angolite* photographs show inmates reading together at tables, sorting through donated books, and enjoying the environment that drastically contrasts the rest of the prison. Unfortunately, this would not always be the case. In June of 1987, prison guards discovered that large amounts of marijuana and cocaine were being smuggled into the prison via the library. Packages were hidden in rolled up copies of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* that were mailed to the prison library, "implying that the recipient either worked in or had easy access to the library and the paper soon after delivery" (July/Aug 1987, 69).

The article details how the recipient – a single inmate-librarian – was caught via a sting operation, but the majority of the piece functions as a subtle critique of the administrative response to the crime. The library was shut down for two months, and all elements such as music and decoration were removed; no more games, no more music, no more socializing. Again, as in other articles, the anonymous writers of this piece go to great lengths to describe how this particular library catered to its unique population: "a kind of oasis...a nice, colorful place adorned with bright posters and a variety of tropical plants" (70). Librarian Gary Long is praised throughout the piece for recognizing both the social and literacy needs of the prison population, while the administration's reaction is scolded: "[Assistant Warden] Thomas' measures essentially punished the entire population for the actions of one inmate" (70). While Thomas is given equal space to offer his official opinion ("I felt it was time to clean up that place a little bit" [71]), *The Angolite* uses its limited power here to critique a situation where the whole population is punished because of one man's actions, detailing how this library had been transformed by both Long and the inmate-librarians into a meaningful space. In the end, Long

resigned from his position as librarian in disgust. After the guards searched the library for drugs, the space was in ruins: “And when he was told the new rules Thomas insisted he operate the new library by, he decided it was time to leave. ‘This library without music or coffee or a globe is not a library...And without posters, plants, chess and checkers, and give-away books, the inmates won’t think so either’” (70).

The library stayed closed for two whole years. As noted in a May/June 1988 article, Governor Buddy Roemer’s strict grip on prison funding did not allow for a librarian to be hired to replace Long. Again, the inmates themselves take up the initiative to raise some of the funding via the Inmate Welfare Fund. While coverage of this period is scant, it is impressive to see how prisoners, with limited means, show the importance of this space by allocating their own money for such a cause. A short piece in the March/April 1989 *Angolite* announces the library’s reopening as well as the drastic changes in policy; only one inmate would be allowed in the library at a time for fifteen-to-twenty minutes. The library’s holdings, of course, had not improved: “The only problem is outdated stock. We need current reading material. It’s a nice tax write-off for anyone donating books to our library” (9).

It seems strange that there is no coverage of the library from 1988 until 2003. I can only speculate as to why no articles on this subject were published in this period – administrative resistance or lack of extended access in light of the publicity that surrounded the 1987 drug bust. Because of the insights Jeffery Hillburn provided me during my fieldwork, I would like to briefly turn the only recent article that features the library, “The Door to Opportunity,” published in the Oct/Nov/Dec 2003 issue. A former prison librarian, Hillburn documents the high traffic that the current prison library sees on a daily basis, profiles a member of its staff, and implicitly argues for more donations. While this space is somewhat different than it was during the 1980s, it is

still positioned as a highly valued space by the inmate community. And like all of the articles in this chapter, regardless of focus or topic, Hillburn argues against dominant impressions of prison life:

A walk into an Angola dormitory or cellblock on any given day will find prisoners escaping in a way that doesn't entail digging under walls or scaling razor-topped fences. Their escape comes through the quiet and peaceful reading of books, magazines, and newspapers. It is a simple search for freedom...Though most are paying for poor choices, they haven't abandoned the quest for knowledge or given up on the hope of improving themselves. (18)

Like the articles concerning the prison library featured during the 1970s and 1980s, *The Angolite* praises those inmates who use the library, positioning them as learners (and, perhaps even monastic, self-examining soul searchers) rather than simply “inmates.” However, Hillburn frames his discussion of the inmate-library by noting the low-level reading ability of the majority of the prison population; a recent Test of Adult Basic Education “showed the average reading level was 5.8, or just slightly below sixth grade” (20). Like the articles in the first section of this chapter, outside readers are presented with an implicit appeal for aid as well as brief descriptions of inmates who use the library and its services as a way of temporarily escaping prison life:

The image of prisoners peacefully reading, at odds with the image of the Angola of the past, is not one that Hollywood can translate into box office revenue...Educational opportunities are important if [prisoners] are to be provided avenues of release and any hope of living a productive life if released. (21)

By positioning inmates as readers and learners – a radically different identity that what is typically shown in the mainstream press – articles that feature the library are actually focused on the men who use this space for spiritual shelter and personal growth. Of course, the “hope” that Hillburn notes in this passage is quite slim; at the time of this article, 3,500 of the 5,108 inmates were serving life or natural life sentences.

But perhaps there is a different sense of hope at hand in these pieces. In all of these articles – even the ones that narrate and critique the severe changes in library policy in the late 1980s – we are shown inmates deciding for themselves that the library as a space is important, that reading and thinking and having a tiny bit of space for one’s self is important and worth having. The inmate-library is also somewhat of a replication of a space that exists within the outside world, and its mere existence offers inmates an avenue of “normal” life. While inmate access to the library was completely withheld for two years and then radically altered until just recently, having the option to use the library space is a choice that one would have outside of prison. We are shown inmates determining for themselves that reading is a worthwhile activity; while this performance, as I have noted throughout this chapter, might be a clever ruse that replicates the values of those that have more choice and agency than inmates, it is still a performance enacted through the writing and interviewing skills of *Angolite* staffers. In each of these pieces, we see a group of marginalized men with extremely limited power making the best use they can of a space where reading and communication opportunities are at least somewhat available in order to transform the quality of their lives.

Transformations: Some Concluding Remarks

While the contextualizing situations of Pratt’s centuries-old Incan letter of protest and the longest continuously running inmate-written news magazine differ in certain ways noted at the beginning of this chapter, the articles, profiles, letters, poems, columns, and other writings included within each issue of *The Angolite* can be read as autoethnographic texts – as acts of written resistance authored and edited by what might be the most unlikely of rhetors. While we cannot always perfectly or easily gauge the success or failure of such community writing acts, we can see how such writers attempt to enter a conversation that, in a sense, has previously

refused to admit them. Scholars such as Bruce Franklin have defined the entire corpus of American prison writing (including such discourses as song lyrics) as just that – an attempt to write an alternative account or history or identity that challenges dominant impressions and therefore enter “the dominant circuits” of discourse that determine daily life behind bars.

In this chapter, we’ve watched *Angolite* writers appeal to inmates at LSP to take part in educational initiatives – even though such initiatives might be lacking. Unfortunately, while there have indeed been notable improvements at LSP, much is left to be attended to when it comes to educational programming.. As I noted in Chapter Two, the educational programming at LSP is still lacking in terms of funding, supplies, and staff but also in terms of curriculum. Furthermore, the only post-secondary program available is provided by the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, a choice that reinforces the neo-conservative religious rhetoric that surrounds any discussions of inmate rehabilitation within the boundaries of Angola. There are dedicated educators employed in this program who deserve accolades for their efforts, but there are indeed problems if this is an inmate’s only choice for college-level instruction. Perhaps, like Poma’s letter, the writings I present here failed in the end. Yet the narratives of inmate-students and the appeals for further educational opportunities are attempts to connect with literacy as a way of improving one’s quality of life – a daunting task in a place like Angola.

We have also looked at moments where *Angolite* writers documented acts of inmates – divided by race or space or even the general distrust of others – working together to not only improve their day-to-day lives but also to contribute to the world that they are disconnected from. Such activities still occur at LSP; the tutors that I worked with are a prime example of men who see the practice of helping others as a way of forging meaning out of wreckage and tragedy. Other groups raise money for Toys for Tots or use their skills to repair broken

wheelchairs for those who cannot afford them. The staff of *The Angolite* over the years has found it necessary to document these acts of vocation in the oldest sense of that word – a calling – and to appeal for other inmates to take part. Here, literacy is used to make a connection with the outside world, to show readers that inmates are indeed capable of change and growth.

Finally, we’ve seen *Angolite* writers argue for the importance of the inmate library as a space that offers a sense of sanctuary. A prison cell, with its anonymous grey block walls, is hardly a home; while Wilson in her own ethnographic studies provides accounts of inmates making artwork out of available materials to try and personalize cells, the cell is still owned by the state. Prisoners are transferred frequently. Even in the trustee dormitories at LSP, an inmate’s bunk and locker are within feet of the next man’s. There is no “room of one’s own” in prison. In fact, as I have noted in an interchapter, *Angolite* staffers see the physical space of their small office as incredibly important because of its relative privacy. The library provides a space that is not the dorm or cell, that is not the prison-assigned workspace, that is not the noisy mess hall or the crowded Walk. Writings that discuss the library and appeal to inmates to respect its value attempt to connect literacy to sanctuary. Although the LSP library is certainly a different space than it was before the drug bust in 1987, it is clear that the inmates still see that space as somewhat theirs. Like the other topics I discuss in this chapter, the library as a space provides inmates with a way to improve the quality of their lives.

While some might suggest that *The Angolite* merely maintains the disciplinarian role of their captors, we have to take into consideration the rarity of such a publication, the low levels of literacy typically associated with inmates in the United States, and the blunted, grinding difficulty of life in a maximum security prison – a difficulty noted in most prison memoirs. “A convict’s word,” argues Walter Burnett (an inmate who contributes to *The Angolite*’s “Sounding

Off” section reserved “as a forum for the opinions of our readers”), “has no credibility, it means absolutely nothing” (Sept/Oct 1987, 76). And while the poetry contributed by inmates in the “Angola Expressions” section is outside the bounds of this chapter, this small section from “Darkness” by Freddie Gibson from that same issue reflects the absolute horror and hopelessness of prison life:

I have had tomorrow
stripped from
my soul
When all seemed certain.
The future
no longer clutters
my mind,
because there is
none. (82)

But, on the other side of the rhetorical coin, *Angolite* articles that concern issues of education, collaboration, and spaces of relative freedom for inmates such as the prison library also cue outside, free readers to support such endeavors (via contributions or letters of support) and to see inmates in a radically different way than they are usually represented in the public media. By using a news magazine as the medium for these messages, and by attempting other methods to put a face on their collective situation as writers – such as Rideau and Wikberg’s televised appearances, Rideau’s participation in the documentary *The Farm*, and the various *Angolite* collaborations with free-world scholars in the production of textbooks such as *The Wall is Strong* and *Death Watch* – *Angolite* writers, like Poma and all participants in contact zones, write to gain a voice within such discussions and turn to methods that both appropriate and transform mainstream discourses.

However, *The Angolite* and the men that it represents are more than just illustrations of Pratt’s theory at work. Via my analyses of *The Angolite*, I contribute a different way of

envisioning literacy as transformation – not as a single epiphany or as a grand, isolated moment that heralds down from the clouds with orchestral accompaniment, but rather as the product of years of slow, perpetual consideration and practice. What we’ve seen here in these accounts are representations of men who take part in reading, writing, and collaborating as a way of slowly transforming both their selves and their world, even if such attempts are fairly futile. All of the men represented here, including the writers of these accounts, choose to take part in these activities as a way of turning their lengthy prison sentences into meaningful, productive times. Although these men are still inmates, still criminals who have committed almost unimaginable acts of destruction, the daily decision to participate in such actions helps them resist the powers of isolation and despair that are rampant in the prison system. Transformation, in the way that I use this term in my research, is not a noun; it is a constant state of being, a process that must be enacted over time. Transformation – perhaps with a lower-case “t” – is a verb. In reading *The Angolite*, we catch glimpses of men who are dedicated to the continuing process of transforming themselves and their world as best they can.

In all of the articles we’ve seen in this study, it is clear that *Angolite* writers position themselves in a number of roles with a range of functions; they chronicle events, champion causes, criticize problematic practices, compose histories, and educate both their fellow inmates and their readers outside of prison. Their work resists typical, traditional accounts of prisoners, and they constantly maintain a strong level of ethics so that readers might see them as trustworthy. Furthermore, they position the inmates they write about, as we have seen throughout this section especially, as capable readers, learners, and collaborators – again, a radically different identity than what is usually assumed about inmates held at Louisiana’s notorious Angola prison. As feminist scholar Ann Folwell Stanford argues in her study of a

creative writing program at a women's county jail facility in Chicago, "simply picking up pen and paper and writing behind bars is itself a subversive act" (289). It is a practice that gives faces and names that humanize mere statistics – an attempt to pierce the panopticon, even if such actions can only go so far:

...in writing at all the author insists that her voice counts, that she has something important to say, that she is potentially an agent in the world...writers begin to see themselves as a 'we' and thus subvert the individualistic rhetoric that permeates the discourse of rehabilitation and punishment...Some of the writers reflect on and critique the oppressive system(s) in which they find and have found themselves...[Inmate writings] serve to disrupt dominant modes of thinking about incarceration and prisoners...the writing becomes a means of construction (and often rediscovery) of the self as a contributing member of society...[W]riting that affirms a 'we' in jail is itself radical work. (295)

Such a statement recalls a moment in Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "What is Literature?", in which he tries to articulate motives for the difficult, deeply personal, and often dangerous – in light of our focus here – in writing: "Each has his reasons; for one, art is flight; for another, it is a means of conquering...One of the chief reasons...is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world" (1336). Sartre closes his discussion with a statement that rings true to the purposes of all prison writers, especially those contained by both physical and ideological bounds that surround Louisiana State Penitentiary: "Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom" (1349). Although literacy scholars in recent years might see such a statement as naïve, the fact that these men choose to write, and choose what to write, and believe that it matters, is an incredible act when considering where such work takes place. Like the system that Poma attempts to write his way into via *First New Chronicle and Good Government*, Angolite writers use a recognized mode of mainstream communication – the newspaper, perhaps the most

historically American of public discourses – to break into what is normally a closed circuit and to enter it, as much as they can, on their own terms.

Third Count: Songs, Funerals, Prayers

“I’m free...Praise the Lord, I’m free.
No longer bound...no chains holding me.
My soul is resting...Oh, what a blessing.
I’m free...Praise the Lord, I am free.”

I wasn’t the first member of the LSU English Department to take an interest in Angola. During the 1950’s, faculty member Dr. Harry Oster began recording and documenting the music of Angola prisoners in a renovated tool room in Camp H, “decorated with primitive murals of dancing figures and clippings of pictures from old newspapers” (3). Field recordings, in the wake of Harry Smith and Alan Lomax, were wildly popular at the time – perhaps as a way of understanding the culture of rural blacks or, more cynically, as a way of further positioning poor Southern laborers, miners, and, in this case, inmates, as freakish others with their rustic entertainments.⁵⁰ Originally released on the tiny regional Louisiana Folksong Society label in 1957 and 1958, the recordings went out of print for years and could only be found in such archives as LSU’s Hill Memorial Library. In the late 1990’s, Arhoolie Records, a preservation label for Southern blues and roots music, began re-releasing these recordings to the general public.

Interestingly, I purchased my copies at the gift shop that is part of the Angola Prison Museum – a tiny building that stands just outside the main gates and, in the late afternoons, in the shadows of Death Row. After viewing exhibits such as makeshift weapons, an imitation electric chair, framed newspaper clippings of escape attempts and protests against the institution, and even the cell designed for visitor photo opportunities that I described in an earlier

⁵⁰ The mere title of one of his recordings, *Country Negro Jam Session*, is obviously problematic. However, I feel that Oster was certainly genuine in his appreciation of rural folk and blues music; the liner notes alone, as well as the difficulty of remote field recording at that time, reflect a sense of care that is admirable.

interchapter, one can also purchase t-shirts with slogans such as “Angola – a Gated Community” as well as coffee mugs, mock-staff caps, stationary, and even copies of *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison*. *That’s good music*, the cotton-haired woman working the cash register said as she bagged my CD’s. And despite my feelings about the problematic nature of a maximum-security prison with a gift shop that cues tourist and consumerist relations, she was right. It is damn good music. The tracks hum and burn with the pain of prison life and the experience of exile.

Some songs follow the standard I-IV-V blues progression, such as the work of Robert Pete Williams, whose 12-string guitar creates a sound as full as a large band despite the solo guitar and voice arrangements. Others songs are straight-on gospel – thrumming bass and baritone voices that moan with the fever of praise and promise: “I’m on my way to the kingdom land...I done signed up, made up my mind...I’m on my way, yes Lord, I’m on my way.” Some songs have no accompaniment whatsoever, such as the improvisation-based field-labor songs that helped pass the fourteen-hour days laboring on Angola Farm. And some songs directly address and critique the elements of time and space that mark both the prison and the prisoner:

Some got six months, some got a solid year...
Some got six months, some got a solid year...
But me and my buddy, we got life time here...
First time in trouble, I done get no fair trial at all...
Seem like to me, baby, they locked the poor boy in jail...

Although some might think that prisons (and especially, southern rural prisons) might be perfect spaces to find gospel and other traditional music – as such spaces are often represented as frozen in time and removed from such influences of pop music and contemporary culture – Oster argues that “in reality, the mass media of entertainment exert almost the same influences as on performers outside. In each camp there were radios which picked up the standard popular music

from stations in Louisiana and Mississippi...” (2). While church-based activities have always been some of the most well-attended group functions at LSP (as noted throughout the entire history of *The Angolite*, going so far as to warrant a regular column that focused exclusively on inmate religious groups starting in the late 1980s), Oster notes that many of the inmates he observed considered gospel-based work songs as “old fashioned, tainted by association with ‘slavery days’” (3). Yet the older inmates at the time of Oster’s fieldwork were a virtual warehouse of traditional blues and gospel music; “The blues,” Oster argues, “were still very much alive” during Oster’s time at Angola (3). To travel back even further in time, consider Huddie Ledbetter, also known as Leadbelly, the famous 1930’s blues singer who wrote “Goodnight, Irene” and was allowed to perform at New York City’s Carnegie Hall years after singing for the governors who pardoned him. His position as one of Angola’s most famous inmates is also lauded at the LSP museum.⁵¹ More troubled histories, more contradictions – all woven in song.

I must confess that there was a part of me that hoped to come across that almost clichéd image – drenched in the sepia light of memory – of a group of older, black men playing gutbucket blues on worn guitars, perhaps while sitting on feed buckets or in cane-back chairs. During my archive work at Hill Memorial Library, I came across the announcement of Johnny Cash’s performance at Angola; Cash’s prison concerts during the late 1960s, documented on the *Live at San Quentin* and *Live at Folsom Prison* recordings, were wildly popular amongst both

⁵¹ “Our Criminal Past: The Legend of Leadbelly,” published in the January/February 1982 edition of *The Angolite*, offers a compelling history of this historically important blues singer-guitarist and his two terms at Angola. Often billed as “The King of the Twelve-String Guitar,” Leadbelly also served time in the Texas penal system for murder. His unique method of requesting a pardon during his time at Angola – a song dedicated to then governor O. K. Allen – is one of the many interesting moments in his brutal and violent career: “If I had you, Gov’nor O.K. Allen, / Like you got me / I would wake up in de mornin’ / Let you out on reprieve” (*The Angolite* 73). It has often been argued that the song earned his pardon as much as anything else (*The Angolite* 73). The writers of *The Angolite* profile of Leadbelly note that “The prison experience did nothing to change Leadbelly. It only made him tougher, and he immediately returned to...gambling, womanizing, drinking, and fighting (71).

country and pop music consumers by the time the Cash tour reached the gates of LSP; I imagined the Man in Black on the Angola stage, flanked by his Tennessee Three sidemen and June Carter and drawling out his songs of violence and faith, hopelessness and redemption, with that powerful baritone voice while the inmates stomped and clapped.

Gospel music, despite massive changes in popular culture that have taken place during Angola's century-plus history, still plays an important role at LSP. In the late 1980s, a radio station – KLSP (“the incarceration station...the station that kicks behind the bricks”) – was founded as a way to keep inmates informed about safety issues and news reports. Trustees – inmates with extremely good behavioral records who can move about the prison fairly easily without guard supervision – work as DJ's from 6a.m. to 2a.m, mostly spinning gospel and contemporary Christian music. However, bluegrass, hip-hop, and oldies also get airplay in the evenings, along with a weekly talk-show for the Muslim prison population. All selections are screened by prison administrators, and, unlike most other radio stations, no call-in requests are allowed; the station doesn't even have a telephone. As I approached the prison during my drives, I would tune into KLSP.

“Our greatest challenge,” notes Warden Burl Cain in a recent *New York Times* article, “is to give hope where there is hopelessness. The radio station does just that – it beams out positive information”. And clearly, one of the purposes of *The Angolite* has been to provide that same sense of hope to its inmate readers. Throughout the 1970s especially, articles and inmate artwork are showcased within the pages of the publication that encourage inmates to not give up, to take up efforts to improve themselves and to contribute to the prison population in a meaningful, positive way. While *The Angolite* serves a range of purposes, as I've noted throughout this study, its attempt to connect with inmates with narratives of hope and

transformation is indeed a radical act. Divided from society and kept within a space that is defined by constant surveillance, a news publication such as *The Angolite* allows inmates to identify with each other, to see how their struggles and sadness are intertwined. While *The Angolite* plays a number of roles within its community of readers, it offers a message of hope: *you are not alone*.

*

One morning I entered *The Angolite* office to find Jeffery Hillburn and Kerry Meyers more quiet than usual; something was different. Usually, there would be other staffers at their desks working on layout or stories or research, but this day the office was still. I had begun to know these two men quite well. Hillburn was especially interested in my project; he often offered book recommendations and talked about his current projects. He also told me a great deal about other efforts he was a part of at Angola; most of the staffers belonged to groups such as the Jaycees, the Human Relations Club, and Toastmasters. Some had even won awards for their philanthropic work behind bars. While these acts certainly were listed in parole files, all of the writers were aware of the low chances for getting out of Angola. Most inmates would only find escape in death – a reality that I was about to see up close for the first time.

Hillburn asked if I wanted to attend an inmate funeral to be held at Point Lookout with some staff members; some of them had been long-term friends with this inmate, and many staffers volunteered as Hospice aides – visiting hospitalized inmates who had no close family members and who were, essentially, dying alone. While neither Hillburn nor Meyers made much of their Hospice work in our conversations, it was obvious to me that their work was meaningful to them. Like their journalism, they felt that such volunteerism allowed them to make something good out of their situations. I imagined the Hospice unit, the bodies lined up in

plain white beds, and I shuddered at the thought of such loneliness. However, I was amazed that I had been invited to attend such a private and intimate occasion; I had told them at the beginning of my observations that I would leave the office anytime they asked, yet here I was – a welcomed outsider who would watch them tell their friend goodbye.

As I showed in Chapter Two, inmate funerals have been transformed over the years from mere acts of anonymous mass burial to gathering occasions that look quite similar to funeral services in the free world. Yet inmates still bury their own dead, still dig the graves and make the headstones and offer the eulogies. Some inmates even choose to be buried at Point Lookout as opposed to having their blood kin transport their bodies home so that their living friends at Angola – their adoptive families, in a sense – can visit them and maintain their graves. Such a decision is portrayed in *The Farm*; we are shown a dying inmate nicknamed Bones who makes this choice despite his family’s lack of understanding. We watch Bones say his final goodbyes to Wilbert Rideau and other inmates from his hospital bed and state that his family, the men who cared for him the most, are at Angola. This harrowing scene shows an inmate as a human being with emotions and regrets – one of the primary rhetorical effects of *The Angolite*.

I was not allowed to ride the bus with the inmates to Point Lookout for security reasons. But as I trailed behind them in my car, I listened to one of the Arhoolie recordings that I always kept close by during my travels to and from LSP. I imagined the conversations of the men on the bus – their recollections and stories, their shared silences. I thought of *The Angolite*, the Hospice Team, the inmate-tutors such as Preacher, Taurus, James, Hollywood, and the other inmate groups that fought to keep hope alive despite incredible odds. As Eugene Tanniehill, an inmate minister profiled in *The Farm*, states, prison “will bring you to a crossroads, a turning point.” Brought to those crossroads, these men that I had come to know understood that one of the ways

to survive the prison experience was to form, as best they could, a community. While such a term, as noted by Raymond Williams, is problematic in that “unlike all other terms of social organization...it seems never to be used unfavourably” (76) and while this same term is critiqued by recent literacy scholars such as Pratt for its connotations of neatness when it comes to classrooms or other groups where language is crucial, the men that I had met through the tutoring group and *The Angolite* had indeed built communities of support.

As the pallbearers marched toward the grave, the thirty-odd inmates who were allowed to attend gathered in a loose circle and began to sing the lines that introduced this section. I stood between them and the officials that oversaw this occasion. I looked around at Point Lookout, at the lines of grave markers that spanned across the fenced field. Many were old and only anonymously marked; a few had flowers or small American flags. Bob Dylan once noted that “Songs are supposed to be heroic enough to give the illusion of stopping time” (McDonough 323), and perhaps that’s true. The metaphors of chains and bindings, rest and blessings, sang through my mind as I watched them lower the body into the ground.

I did not know at the time that this moment would be one of my last at Angola, that I would never again see the tutors or *Angolite* staffers and would not have the opportunity to explain what happened, that I had not abandoned them. But what I recall most at this moment was the singing – the low, round voices that choired their friend away from Angola.

Chapter Five:
“Fighting to be a Man” –
***Angolite* Representations of Sex Behind Bars**

“We’ll start from the time that you’re going on down the walk... A few of the inmates will come out and be looking at you, will be looking you over and seeing who they might want to claim for their kid or who they might make pay for protection...There will be about fifty to seventy-five inmates out there...The best thing I can tell you is that you should carry your own stuff on down the walk. Because if you don’t there’s the possibility that if you do get help...then someone’s gonna come by about nine o’clock that night and, uh, fuck you in the ass. I don’t like to use the terms that I’m using now...If you wanna be a kid, you wanna get fucked in the ass or pay for protection, you do that...Now, I can’t tell you how to do your time...But if you want to be a man, the best you can do is act like a man.”

-- from the documentary film *Louisiana Prison: Angola* (1974)

In the previous chapters, I have presented and analyzed *Angolite* articles that perform a number of functions. In the more recent issues I discussed in Chapter Two as well as in issues from the publication’s most popular period of 1970-1990 that I discussed in Chapter Four, *Angolite* articles offer representations that drastically counter stereotypical images of the American inmate. As readers, we are shown prisoners participating in self-help groups, working towards their own rehabilitation despite the fact that few inmates held at LSP gain parole. We have seen inmates chronicling their own histories and publishing creative pieces that document the harsh reality of the prison experience. We have been presented with narratives of inmates working collaboratively to appeal for more sustained educational opportunities. We have been given narratives of inmates contributing to their own immediate community as well as to inmates in other prisons and even to people in need who live beyond the borders of the penitentiary. These representations do not deny the harsh reality of the prison experience, nor do they voice radical assaults against either Angola itself or the larger prison institution. They do not make explicit legal appeals for the publication’s writers. Instead, *The Angolite* employs a range of voices – the objective journalist, the engaged and attentive historian, the passionate poet or

fiction writer – to give readers a sense of the prison world from an inmate’s perspective, a perspective that, as Morris shows in his historical account of the penal press, has been mostly silenced in recent years. *The Angolite* evokes voices that ring with authenticity and authority and reflect a clear awareness of the needs of their various audiences (such as inmates, administrators, and non-inmate readers). The careful, engaged voices that are present within this publication are part of a deliberately deployed strategy that helps all readers, regardless of social position, to view staff writers and contributors as responsible journalists. As Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*, the prisoner “is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (201). Yet in the case of *The Angolite*, inmate journalists work to write and publish accounts and narratives, despite the various difficulties that face inmate publications.

Recalling the work of Deborah Brandt, whom I discussed at the end of Chapter Three, one can argue that *Angolite* staffers draw upon the genres typically found in mainstream newspapers in order to attempt to be recognized by non-inmate readers as responsible speakers who provide documented accounts. These literacies are not merely local nor are they entirely developed within the specific context of Angola prison. However, because of the difficulties that penal publications typically face (a topic taken up by scholars who ground my own study such as Morris and Novek), the low level reading and writing abilities that plague the prison system as a whole in the United States (as seen in the National Adult Literacy Survey and within the testimonies from inmate educators I offered in Chapter Three), and the physical and ideological division between prison and the rest of society, *The Angolite* can be seen as an important literacy practice produced by a specific, local community that offers narratives of personal transformation. While the possibility of transformation via literacy has been challenged in recent

years, my analysis of *The Angolite* attempts to re-define our understanding of personal emancipation via the acts of writing, reading, and publishing; through the slow and labored process of developing high-level literacy skills, these writers and perhaps even the men that they speak for not only see themselves as contributing to a community and working towards improving their basic quality of life but also ask to be seen by others as more than docile, institutionalized inmates or animalistic brutes.

Considering Sloop's understanding of the "just desserts" era of punishment, in which education and rehabilitation programs are given the backseat to containment and surveillance, one cannot assign full credit for such personal transformations to administrators or prison staff. In a recent interview, prison scholar H. Bruce Franklin argues, "There was a period in American history when we really thought we could send somebody to prison and make a new person out of them...That's long gone" (Caldwell). Scholars such as Franklin, Angela Davis, Joseph Hallinan, and others who ground my analysis of *The Angolite* argue that the current prison system in the United States merely perpetuates criminal activity and cycles of poverty. As I have noted throughout this study, *Angolite* writers – men who are serving either life or virtual life sentences with extremely limited chances for parole – challenge the cultural notion of the incorrigible, unredeemable inmate and the lack of sustained rehabilitative and educational programs through the continued, engaged practices of writing, reading, and publishing their work. Via such acts, these men see and present themselves as important contributors who are worthy of both attention and basic human decency – perhaps the first step towards emancipation.

However, I would be remiss if I left readers with the impression that *The Angolite* is *only* a collection of uplifting, inspiring narratives of inmates held at Louisiana State Penitentiary. While *Angolite* issues published in the 1950s and 1960s are mainly geared toward an all-Angola

audience and primarily function as a medium for communication and news updates (with certain exceptions, as we will soon see), *Angolite* issues since the 1970s have often taken up topics that show “the dark recesses of Angola” (Morris 163) and seem to appeal to an audience outside the barriers of LSP. As I noted in Chapter One, articles that chronicled the violence of the Red Hat barracks or that described the moment-to-moment physical effects of execution by electrocution helped establish the popularity of this publication. *The Angolite* has also offered accounts of extreme inmate violence, the characteristics of inmate suicides, and even the final moments of inmates on Death Row. Such accounts are hardly the stuff of “feel good” stories.

In this chapter, I focus on *Angolite* articles that discuss prison sexuality and, specifically, the practice of inmate rape. While consensual sex acts behind bars, violent inmate rape, and “protective pairing” oriented relationships (in which a stronger inmate will protect a weaker inmate from violence and gang rape in exchange for sexual favors and domestic duties such as “doing laundry, making the bunk, keeping the cell clean, and making and serving coffee” [Donaldson 121]) are distinctly different social relationships with different types of consequences, these topics are brought together within this chapter because of the fairly clandestine nature of sexual practices behind bars and because they all involve sexual (or apparently sexual) acts. The specific issues that drive my analysis of these articles include *Angolite* representations of sexual practices behind bars as well as how these writers define – either explicitly or implicitly – masculinity and rape. Furthermore, I examine how *The Angolite*’s role in disseminating information that deals with inmate sexual practices and in critiquing the prison administration’s corresponding policies changes over a historical period. I also note the role of race within these discussions. Scholars such as Pinar and Sloop argue that race is the most prominent factor in prison-based sexual violence. Yet as we will see in these

accounts, the element of race is almost entirely ignored. I also explore whether or not dominant ideologies concerning gender and sexuality are challenged and/or sustained.

Although I argue that there are indeed some problematic elements in these pieces, I find these *Angolite* articles and profiles amazing in their ability to speak about what is mostly silenced and in their attempt to pierce the normative gaze of the prison world. These writers attempt to speak as opposed to being spoken for, to name as opposed to being named. While this chapter examines a set of articles that is radically different than other sets presented within this study, they attempt to fulfill the same functions – to articulate inmate concerns and to educate their non-inmate audience about daily life in the all-too-hidden world behind bars. Although these writers’ potential for agency is obviously limited, their work as inmate-journalists and editors allows them to at least have some say in the matter, to offer their own point of view, and to see themselves as something other than just inmates doing hard time. Through writing about acts and events that challenge inmate stereotypes and reveal the horrors of the prison system, *Angolite* writers take part in a literacy practice that allows them to connect with both inmate and non-inmate readers as well as contribute to their own community in a meaningful way.

Despite the comparatively few *Angolite* pieces that deal with these topics, I chose to present my analysis of these articles for a number of reasons. While *Angolite* articles such as those I discussed in previous chapters offer a representation that certain readers positioned outside of the prison space might wish to see of inmates, my analysis of *Angolite* articles that discuss aspects of sex behind prison walls highlights the unique challenges that penal publications face when confronted with what Novek calls “the devil’s bargain.” Again, penal publications such as *The Angolite* are under the control of wardens and prison administrators; as Novek notes in her own study, articles and narratives that directly critique practices at the

penitentiary in which her inmate-participants were confined are always censored. While *The Angolite* has argued throughout its history (especially after Rideau took over as editor in the early 1970s) that they are not subject to official censorship, it is indeed interesting to see how *Angolite* writers articulate discussions of inmate sexual practices that, as Sabo et al. have argued, are generally denied or ignored by prison officials. The range of audiences that *Angolite* staffers address – inmates both at LSP and other institutions, wardens and administrators, non-inmate readers – offers different rhetorical challenges and requires different rhetorical moves. How might an inmate journalist talk and write about practices within his or her own specific prison that are generally denied or avoided by official authorities? To evoke the late Johnny Cash, I present an analysis of how these writers at different periods of *Angolite* history (especially during the Rideau years) “walk the line” in terms of their discussions of sex acts behind bars as well as possible consequences of both consensual and non-consensual sex such as AIDS and other diseases.

Another reason for my particular choice involves *The Angolite*’s ability to talk about this delicate topic at all. As I began reading *Angolite* articles that discuss prison sex practices, I thought that such accounts provided readers – especially non-inmate readers – with representations that the general public would rather ignore altogether. Recalling the work of Angela Davis and Loic Wacquant, whose work concerning the concealed nature of the prison introduced Chapter Three, my initial understanding seemed valid. However, as I continued to read these *Angolite* articles and learn more about prison rape and its connections to power, I became less certain of my initial assessment. Perhaps the clandestine nature of prison sex might

actually entice audiences.⁵² In popular representations of prison films such as *The Shawshank Redemption* or television programs such as *Oz* or *Prison Break*, inmate rape is a stock feature; even if such acts are not shown on-screen, rape or the potential for rape is certainly discussed by characters and acts as a powerful, fearful presence. Daniel Brook, in a recent *Legal Affairs* article, argues that “Evocations like the one in *25th Hour* [Spike Lee, 2002] aren’t meant to inspire outrage in the moviegoer; they’re meant to stir up fear. In films like Lee’s or Curtis Hanson’s *LA Confidential*, rape is a fixture of prison life as unavoidable as lights out...it’s a convenient shorthand for all the potential horrors of prison” (Brook). Much of the research on filmic representations of prison life argues that the prison film as a genre confirms, rather than challenges, hegemonic masculinity (Jarvis; Mason; O’Sullivan). Furthermore, popular representations of prison rape are not limited to films and television programs; contemporary hip-hop lyrics occasionally offer narratives that take place within the prison environment: “cellmate’s raped on the norm / And passed around the dorm, you can hear his asshole getting torn.”⁵³ In both filmic and lyrical representations of prison, the central figure is positioned as an individual who struggles to avoid rape and maintain his masculine, powerful status.

While it might be somewhat problematic to compare representations of prison sex practices in journalistic publications such as *The Angolite* to fictionalized representations in films, television programs, or hip-hop lyrics, all of these representations could be read as an

⁵² Sarah Projansky, in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, provides an interesting discussion concerning filmic representations of sexual violence against women and its effects on various audiences, especially the ways audiences seem drawn to this kind of violence and the ways producers market to this fascination.

⁵³ A study that traces the number and type of references to prison, and prison rape specifically (such as this particular lyric from 2Pac’s “16 on Death Row”), in hip-hop might be quite fascinating. Consider this lyric from Nas’ “One Love” (from *Illmatic*): “...better watch it cause they’ll put that ass on fire / Last time you wrote, you said they tried you in the showers.” This particular song is structured around a series of letters from the narrator to his friend in prison. “Nathaniel,” from Outkast’s double-platinum selling *Aquemini*, provides a first-person prison narrative that challenges the rehabilitative aspects of prison life with a unique *a cappella* arrangement. Much thanks goes to Dr. Susan Weinstein for her thorough understanding of hip-hop culture and for re-introducing me to Nas’ recorded work.

opportunity for voyeurism – a way of peeping through the bars or walls for a moment. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, heterosexuality became normalized over time via discursive systems that set apart any acts outside of heterosexual relationships as perversion. Certainly, we could include the full range of male-male sexual acts behind bars, from the consensual to the coerced as a set of practices that are set apart from the normalized act of heterosexual relations. Such acts, considering the separation of the prison from the rest of society, become exotic and eroticized. Perhaps certain more politically conservative constituents might argue that an environment where the brutality of rape is indeed a possibility would be most fitting for incarcerated felons – a harsh extension of the “just desserts” philosophy; furthermore, Polych and Sabo have argued that the lack of sustained health care that could help deal with the AIDS epidemic within prisons (a topic taken up by *Angolite* articles presented in this chapter) is an extension of “the trend away from overt torture to more covert forms of punishment” (179) as traced by Foucault. However, the popular representations (especially films and television programs) of prison sexual practices might also serve to even further normalize the position of mainstream, heterosexual viewers.

What separates *Angolite* accounts of prison sex acts with these other, more mainstream representations is rooted in genre and the question of audience expectations. As Patricia Bizzell argues in “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing,” certain genres imply specific relationships between writers and audiences; while Bizzell’s main argument is aimed at expanding the conversation in writing classrooms beyond the rules of grammar and syntax and toward a deeper understanding of genre, her emphasis on the social implications of genre fit well when considering how *The Angolite* (and other prison news publications) is somewhat different than other representations of prisons. By circulating their

ideas via a news publication and maintaining the distant, objective voice that readers commonly associate with the mainstream press, these writers essentially imply that *this is how it is*.

Prison sexual practices, and specifically prison rape, are perhaps the ultimate taboo subject within the larger discourse of prisons and punishment – a taboo that is rarely discussed by inmates because of its potentially emasculating effects. The complexity of prison sexual acts, and inmate rape specifically, as it relates to notions of masculinity is an important factor in this conversation. Sabo argues, “As a citadel for punishment (rather than rehabilitation), the prison as an institution embodies the masculine ideal of toughness. Prisoners and guards adopt a hard-ass posture as they walk the block and do their time.” (59). In a similar manner, Brook notes, “Male rape victims may be even more likely than female rape victims to underreport out of intimidation or shame” (Brook). A prisoner might also not report a crime committed against himself during his sentence because he simply might not see the point in doing so and cannot envision any relief or justice resulting from reporting the incident. As Wilbert Rideau argues in a March 12, 1980 interview with *CBS Evening News*, “It takes a hell of a lot for a guy to get up and say he was raped, or he was a slave to another guy for years and years and years” (Morris 162). The widespread practice of prison rape as a form of control and dominance, as well as its effects within a homosocial environment such as prison, provides yet another reason for the focus of this chapter. As noted in the findings section of *The Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003*, nearly 13 percent of the inmates in the United States have reported being sexually assaulted in prison (which includes county jails as well as state and federal penitentiaries); “Under current levels of imprisonment, this would imply that about 200,000 inmates...have been sexually assaulted” (3).

Still, as I have established already, most prison rape goes unreported; therefore, members

of the general public are largely unaware of “the epidemic proportions of prison rape and the daily horror of rape victims” (3). In this statement lies perhaps the most important reason to examine these moments within the larger body of *Angolite* writing; *The Angolite*, at times, is able to discuss such concealed practices that make both inmates and non-inmates uncomfortable and that produce a horrific range of physical and psychological effects. As noted in the *Prison Rape Elimination Act*, rape behind bars contributes to diseases such as HIV and hepatitis B and C. Furthermore, “the high levels of prison rape violate prisoners’ rights under the Cruel and Unusual Punishment clause of the Eighth Amendment of the U. S. Constitution; and that prison rape undermines other government efforts to promote public health, public safety, salutary race relations, and economic sufficiency” (3).

But what can federal legislation do to stop a brutal practice that, for the most part, goes unreported; is often tolerated by administrators; and results in even further violence when an inmate takes the risk of speaking out (Bartollas, Miller, and Dinitz 39)? Critics of this legislation, as noted in popular media such as *Slate*, argue that such a move is essentially toothless. Saum et al. argues that prisoners may purposely underestimate reports of sexual activity behind bars because of possible repercussions from correctional officers or other inmates; furthermore, inmates may be embarrassed to admit to such acts for fear of being labeled as weak: “Even worse, admitting to having been raped in prison goes against the inmate code whereby status and power are based on domination and gratification” (Saum et al.). Tom Cahill, a survivor of prison rape, offers a similar statement: “Once ‘turned out’ – prison parlance for rape – a survivor is caught in a bind. If an inmate reports a sexual assault, even without naming the assailant, he will be labeled a ‘snitch,’ a contract will automatically be placed on him, and his life expectancy will be measured in minutes from then” (32).

Robert Weisburg and David Mills, both law professors at Stanford, posit the following argument against recent legislation aimed to stop prisoner rape:

Inmates will attack inmates if enough of them live in sufficient proximity, with insufficient internal security, for long enough periods of time. That means that while Congress funds lots of studies, we already know that the key variables are really the sheer rates of incarceration in the United States, the density of prison housing, the number and quality of staff, and the abandonment of any meaningful attempts at rehabilitation (Weisburg and Mills).

As noted by numerous critics of the current prison system such as Hallinan and Davis, there is little political drive at the present time to make such changes to a prison system that is both rhetorically reinforced by dominant representations of prisoners (as argued by Sloop) and that is incredibly profitable for industries (as argued by Hallinan). And perhaps Americans have simply accepted violence – and sexual violence – as an acceptable part of punishment in our federal and state prisons.⁵⁴ Although the actual rate or number of prison rapes has differed from study to study and although certain scholars have argued that rape in male prisons is much lower than we might imagine (Lockwood; Nacci and Kane; Wooden and Parker), narratives such as those published within *The Angolite* show that sexual acts such as rape indeed exist within the closed communities of the prison system. Toch notes “Prisoner estimates of rape are often inflated, but the danger is nevertheless real.” (279). While *Angolite* discussions of prison sexual practices might not have the rhetorical power of academic studies or human rights accounts or critiques published in mainstream newspapers or on websites to effect social or political change, their accounts are indeed important because of the fact that, as I have already noted throughout this study, the inmate’s point of view is so rarely available. As noted by Sabo et al., “[p]rison is an ultramasculine world where nobody talks about masculinity” (3).

William F. Pinar, whose expansive work in gender theory and the rhetoric of prison rape

⁵⁴ See Bell for a discussion of such attitudes.

informs this chapter, notes that “The constant refrain of prison is sodomy” (1069). Drawing upon an impressive body of sociological accounts and ethnographic informants, he argues that prison rape is rooted in race-based frictions and is an extension of American slavery, segregation, the convict lease systems of the early 20th century, and the horrific practice of lynching: “prison rape reflects, captures something essential about, racial politics and violence in America” (1014). The quoted passage at the beginning of this chapter, transcribed from a scene in the short documentary film *Louisiana Prison: Angola* (1974), captures much of the essence of what is one of the greatest fears of inmates entering the penitentiary system. In terms of *mis en scene*, Dunn, a white male, is positioned at the center of the frame behind what looks like a lectern used by a preacher or professor. He stands before a group of what can be presumed to be recently admitted inmates at Angola, all seated and staring at Dunn with eyes that can only be described as hollow and lifeless. Short clips of white and black inmates – “fresh fish” entering Angola for the first time, walking past the watchful eyes of other, mostly black inmates – are juxtaposed with Dunn’s monologue. The combination of Dunn’s speech and images of inmates headed down what is known at Angola as “The Walk” work to show viewers yet another level of despair. To avoid such a fate as rape, one must commit more violence and maintain one’s sense of masculinity. Although Dunn never explicitly states the chances of being raped in this particular clip, it is implied that the new group of inmates are walking towards their own certain symbolic castration. Dunn is a central figure in one of the *Angolite* articles discussed within this chapter, and his account as well as the others presented within *The Angolite* rings true to the “constant refrain” that Pinar argues to be the central fear of the long-term inmate and a cornerstone in the general public’s understanding of the prison experience.

Finally, I chose this particular set of articles because of the language that writers from

various decades used to discuss inmate sex practices that mirror practices of gender domination in the world outside of prison:

Men's efforts to weave webs of domination through rape and physical intimidation *in prison* also reflect and reproduce men's domination of women in the social world beyond the walls. In the muscled, violent, and tattooed world of prison rape, woman is symbolically ever-present. She resides in the pulpy, supple, and muted linguistic folds of the hardness/softness dichotomy. Rape-based relationships between prisoners are often described as relationships between "men" and "girls" who are, in effect, thought of as "master" and "slave," victor and vanquished. (Sabo 64)

Consider Dunn's word choices in the passage that introduces this chapter: while "kid" might seem gender-neutral, it is clear in the context of the prison that such a term is feminized (like "bitch"), equated with weakness and submissiveness and therefore positioned as negative. We will see examples of the language that inmates use to discuss sexual practices behind bars; Rideau's "The Sexual Jungle" – one of his most lauded works – is a veritable lexicon of prison terminology for the initiate. In these language choices, it can be argued that although each writer attempts to document and even challenge a particularly violent practice, their writing in fact sustains and reinforces traditional gender roles. While these *Angolite* articles do indeed challenge practices that terrorize inmates, the manner in which such practices are broached can be read as a perpetuation of misogynistic attitudes about gender.

In this chapter, I generally take a chronological approach to show how *The Angolite's* discussion of prison sex practices changes over a long stretch of time. Within this discussion, I define gender as the socially constructed performance of traits that are generally seen as either masculine or feminine but are not based entirely upon biological assignment. Sexuality, on the other hand, is defined as the physical identity one performs as part of his or her erotic nature. The term rape is defined by Gaes and Goldberg in their National Institute of Justice publication

Prison Rape: A Critical Review of the Literature as “the carnal knowledge, oral sodomy, sexual assault with an object, or sexual fondling of a person forcibly or against that person’s will” (4). While there are many governmental and academic studies of prison rape, I should point out here that this chapter examines how *The Angolite* writes about prison sexual practices; it is not explicitly an examination of sexual acts behind bars, but rather an analysis of how *Angolite* writers have talked about this subject within their publication at specific moments. While this chapter draws upon articles from the earliest years of *The Angolite* as well as more recent pieces, I pay particular attention to two extended articles by Wilbert Rideau published in the 1980s. Given that Rideau was the first *Angolite* writer to focus so directly and explicitly on inmate sexual practices and considering his lengthy tenure as a writer and editor, it seems fitting to take a close look at some of his work within this chapter. These articles, “The Sexual Jungle” in particular, gained both Rideau and *The Angolite* a substantial degree of public attention, and Rideau certainly deserves discussion because of his important role in the publication’s development and public relations.⁵⁵

“The Homosexual Problem” – Early *Angolite* Representations of Prison Sexuality

While the previous chapter drew mainly from *Angolite* editions published during the 1970s and 1980s, it is helpful to turn back a bit further in this publication’s history to see how these writers discussed inmate sexual behavior – and, in this specific set of articles, the forms that consensual sex takes in a hyper-controlled environment – over a longer trajectory. According to Mary M. Daughtery, a native of Ireland who had been Angola’s registered nurse for eight years in 1951, the Louisiana State Penitentiary during her years of employment had

⁵⁵ Both Stop Prison Rape (www.spr.org) and Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) cite Rideau’s “The Sexual Jungle” as a key text for understanding the graphic nature of inmate rape.

been “a sewer of degradation...where sex offenders, stool pigeons, homosexuals...degenerates of every type” were “huddled in bedside companionship with the new arrivals” (Carleton 153). Her report, which is now displayed as part of the Angola Prison Museum’s collection along with other reports of Angola’s bloody and violent history, attracted massive amounts of attention in the public media according to Carleton’s history. Around the time her story was published, the United States found out about the now infamous “heel-string” incident, in which inmates slashed their own heel tendons in protest of the incredibly harsh work and living conditions at the penal farm.⁵⁶ Daughtery’s testimony to the harsh conditions at LSP attests to the horrific landscape of Angola – at the time, Louisiana’s only state prison institution. Her comments were a staunch critique of both the immediate administration and the goals of the larger penal system: whippings and beatings by guards – including the armed inmate guards – were quite common, but the “real brutality” according to Daughtery was “the complete lack of rehabilitation” (Carleton 153). Criminals kept at Angola, as argued within her testimony, simply became harder criminals, brutalized to an animalistic nature – a comparison that Rideau would use in his article decades later entitled “The Sexual Jungle.”

Yet it is interesting that despite Daughtery’s testimony (which, interestingly, is never even mentioned within *The Angolite*’s pages), along with other accounts of Angola showcased within Carleton’s historical study as well as Butler and Hamilton’s two volumes of Angola narratives, very few stories within *The Angolite* issues from the 1950’s explicitly discuss the notions of either inmate sexuality or rape. The graphic descriptions that we will see in Rideau’s “The Sexual Jungle” are not present in these pieces, nor are any specific participants profiled or interviewed. The articles that discuss sex, mainly penned by the anonymous “Old Wooden Ear,” always position homosexuality as deviant behavior performed only because of the absence of

⁵⁶ For an account of the heel-string incident, see Butler and Henderson 1990, Chapter One.

women; in his writings, he makes no distinction between male-male consensual sex (as a substitute for unavailable heterosexual sex opportunities) and the possibility of inmate rape. As I noted in the introduction to this study, Old Wooden Ear was the pseudonym for William Sadler – the first *Angolite* staff member, who ran the publication essentially as a solo effort until the late 1950s.⁵⁷ In the articles analyzed within this section, Sadler connects inmate sexual behavior with such other issues as the remote nature of the prison, the lack of public knowledge about what actually occurs within the boundaries of Angola and all other penal institutions, and, again, the absolute lack of female contact.

Sloop's discussion of the public representation of American prisoners during the 1950's is interesting to note here; homosexuality within the prison system, especially within the post World War II years, "signifies an aberration from which prisoners rarely recover. Furthermore, it is cited as one other root of violence and rioting within prisons" (48). Homosexuality, in the eyes of penitentiary administrators, is represented as a challenge that works against the rehabilitation of "normal" prisoners. Sadler reflects the same general condemnation of homosexuality that Sloop finds in public discussions of prisoners, yet these *Angolite* articles from the 1950s never mention any inmate violence connected to homosexual relations. Sadler positions homosexuality as an abominable deviation from normality and as something that can be "cured" via changes in prison policy – specifically, female visitation arrangements and conjugal visits in the case of married inmates. In these articles, *The Angolite* positions itself as a legitimate resource for possible solutions to inmate problems.

The first *Angolite* story that focused on inmate sexual behavior within the confines of Louisiana State Penitentiary was an editorial entitled "Sex in Prison Needs Airing" from the

⁵⁷ Dr. Edward D. Grant, Director of Institutions in Louisiana from 1952-58, states that Sadler "used the paper constructively...to keep prisoners informed and to build morale" (*Angolite* Jan/Feb 1980, 2-3). From this point on, I refer to Old Wooden Ear by his last name.

September 26, 1953 issue (during the first official year of *Angolite* publication). Sadler – again, the single *Angolite* staff member at the time – begins by noting the taboo nature of such a subject, “[T]aboo from the standpoint of inmate publications as well as from outside discussion” (4). Throughout the piece, he continually grounds his discussion in the lack of opportunities for “normal,” heterosexual relations: “The hush-hush policy seems to have stemmed from the idea that a convict is some sort of freak who needs no sex outlet and who is content to live a celibate life” (4). Recalling Foucault, this discussion of illicit sexual practices further positions heterosexuality as normal and dominant. Essentially, the writer posits that deviant (homosexual) relations exist within the prison system because of prison policy that provides no outlet for “normal” relations.

As I have noted already in other chapters, one of *The Angolite*’s purposes is to provide a representation that humanizes Angola inmates – a step away from the “freak” that Sadler and other later writers mention as the typically held stereotype of prisoners. Yet it is ironic that inmate writers who are incredibly committed to humanizing themselves and their peers in other penal institutions continue to reinforce a less-than-human view of women. Women, in this passage and elsewhere, are simply positioned as a requirement in maintaining normalized masculinity; without the presence of women, the writer argues that inmates are left with no other choice but to turn to “pervert thoughts if not actions” (4): “Being deprived of his natural sexual outlet, it is to be expected (and yet how absurdly abhorred!) that he should engage in other and bizarre sexual practices” (4). In this piece, the writer critiques the paradoxical nature of the administration’s implicit role in what he sees as a deviant practice; he argues that the administration punishes homosexual acts yet fails to provide what he sees as a suitable alternative. In “The Sexual Jungle,” an *Angolite* article published over three decades later, we

will see a similar critique of administrative policy; Rideau argues that prison officials indeed know about and implicitly support inmate sexual practices (specifically inmate rape and inmate slavery) as a way of maintaining power relations within the prison system.

Perhaps, considering the moment of this particular article, this view of women is not surprising; in a Gramscian sense, acts of resistance often actually maintain dominant systems – in this case, the dominant sexual order of masculine superiority. Sadler then argues that sex in prison, despite its lack of coverage in inmate publications as well as public, free world newspapers, “is as common as the steel and cement without which these quods wouldn’t hold a soul” (4) and exists only because of the absence of women and not because of power relations. This account runs somewhat counter to Sloop’s assessment of popular press representations of inmates during the 1950s, where homosexual inmates are positioned as a prime cause of inmate violence. One recounting of a riot during this period, Sloop notes, describes how “wolf packs of homosexuals prowled the cell blocks” (49) while raping and beating other inmates. Yet such violence is completely absent from these *Angolite* articles; the only elements given any attention at all include fairly sanitized admissions of homosexual practices and the absence of women within their lives as inmates. And whether purposely deployed or not, the writer’s comparison here of prison sex acts between males and the physical structure of the penitentiary positions sex in prison as both permanent and impossible to stop by force.

While *The Angolite* was mainly aimed at the LSP inmate audience during this decade, reporting on such issues as the Angola farm, updates on inmate sports events, parole reports, and even gambling lines on college football games, it is clear throughout the piece that Sadler was attempting to speak to the powers that be as well, noting that the “remedy, amelioration, or cure” of what he views as a serious problem “lies directly at the door of prison authorities” (4). Yet he

argues that a top-down, authoritative approach would only fail, and that the inmate population is the real expert on such matters:

For even as most of the present-day reforms have stemmed from the unfairness of prison therapy, so must the reform of what to do about sex come from an inside source. How can a man who has never known hunger describe or prescribe for he who has known it for many of his adult, vigorous years, the average prison inmate?
(4)

This positioning of the inmate population as a source of possible solutions to prison problems is a theme that is common throughout the entire history of *The Angolite*. While the publication during the 1960s seemed almost entirely internally directed, with the majority of its pages dedicated to reporting events at various camps and dorms and aimed entirely at the inmates within LSP rather than outside readers or administrative staff, these early articles from the 1950s as well as the pieces from the 1970s and 1980s that were discussed in Chapter Three show inmate writers discussing their own location and situations and providing inmate-designed solutions to prison problems.

Despite the problematic nature of Sadler's positioning of "normal" visitation by women as the solution to the "dire results" (4) that occur within prisons when men are kept from their "natural sex outlet," we can see that *The Angolite* has always attempted to show how inmates can indeed be a part of the process of identifying and solving issues that exist within their own forced community. This topic comes up again and again within *The Angolite's* pages during this decade, all of which point to the belief that "it is REPRESSIVE SEX MEASURES which are largely responsible for 'deviations'" and that administrators and free readers must learn to "seek the cause and cure not in medicine or in surgery but in understanding of man and his needs, sexually, while in prison" (July 16, 1955, 7). Given the social climate, the mere mention of the topic of sex within prisons seems incredibly radical for a prison newspaper in the Deep South

during the 1950's, despite the work of Dr. Kinsey at places such as San Quentin prison at that very moment.

This editorial, according to the October 10, 1953 issue a few weeks later, was “copied in a few state papers via the Associated Press and also heard on the radio...Maybe this small voice of *The Angolite* can yet help to break down the wall of misunderstanding, fear, and prejudice” (3). The October 17 issue notes that another penal newspaper, *The Eye Opener* in McAlester, Oklahoma, “promises a reprint and a follow-up” (3); the *MSP News* based out of the Missouri penitentiary at Johnson City also reprinted the piece according to the October 31 issue (5), and the November 7 issue reported that the Washington, D.C. prison paper *The Insider* also took up the piece (“More to be desired,” Sadler adds in the report, “is a concrete suggestion...on what to do about the problem” [5]). One non-inmate respondent, whose letter is published in the October 3, 1953 issue, continues the theme of normalized sexual relations: “Both God and nature intended man to live in a state of connubial bliss, otherwise why would he have created Eve?” (4A). Calling upon traditional Christian narratives, this writer praises *The Angolite* but perpetuates the notion that women are, essentially, sexual servants who maintain man’s – or even a male inmate’s – “bliss.” Again, recalling Sloop’s discussion of popular print-based inmate representations in the 1950s, we see both in *Angolite* articles as well as printed responses from readers that homosexuality is a central problem: “The prevailing criminal justice model of rehabilitation [during the 1950s] positions the homosexual as mentally ill and in need of rehabilitation” (Sloop 49).

Sadler, in a string of articles from 1953-55, proposes a somewhat odd type of reform and rehabilitation through his *Angolite* writings to both his inmate and staff readership in the form of mixed inmate dances. Such a social occasion was unheard of at Angola prison, and he claims

that such events had never been tried at other prison institutions either. During the 1950s and 60s, female inmates were housed at Louisiana State Penitentiary in what was dubbed by male inmates as “The Forbidden City”; while maintained by male guards, male prisoners were kept far from the female barracks, resulting in two prisons within the same location. At the time, according to *The Angolite*’s recurring count that appeared in each issue, 61 women were housed at LSP; there were over 2,250 male inmates.⁵⁸ As with other *Angolite* pieces throughout its history, Sadler argues that, “Progress in any penal institution almost always STARTS FROM THE INSIDE. Any steps to build morale, lighten the burden of both keeper and inmate, generally stem from INSIDE suggestions” (Dec. 25, 1953, 2). He suggests dances to be held once a month, in the General Hospital auditorium, under the supervision of LSP security (“Would any more supervision be required for such a dance than what is in force at the visiting rooms?” [2]), with eligibility “based on conduct record” (2). In short, he positions the possibility of a dance as something to be earned as an inmate privilege. These dances are the only solutions proposed by *The Angolite* during this period. This set of articles is interesting not only because of its central topic or the oddity of its arguments, but also because specific discussions that extend beyond the pages of a single issue are rare in the early years of this publication. While inmate grievances or farm reports or general news updates appear in each issue during this period, this particular conversation is one of the few that is repeated, developed, and even supported by statements from outside readers.

⁵⁸ If there was a female-inmate newspaper at Angola, it has been lost to antiquity; again, many records concerning early LSP inmate publications, including *The Angolite*, are either not available to the public or do not exist. Female inmates contributed occasional short articles to *The Angolite* during the 1950s; see Feb 5, 1955 for an example. This same edition notes “*The Angolite* has tried without success for over a year to get residents of the local Forbidden City interested in their own page” (5). If a women’s paper at Angola never existed, which is most likely, this absence clearly reiterates the general sentiment towards women during this particular period. Female inmates were removed from Angola and transferred to St. Gabriel in 1961.

Sadler's support is drawn from the same core of ideas that ground all of the early *Angolite* discussions on inmate sexual deviance: "There is a tendency to place altogether too much emphasis on sex in places like these...A tension, unnatural as well as unnecessary, is built up through periods of disassociation with the opposite gender" (2). He argues that dances are permitted within mental institutions, and that such activities provided by the staff would provide "the very thing that makes for a normal life – the companionship of the sexes" (2). In a sense, the writer challenges the institution to show "foresight and perhaps a pinch of boldness...to put such an innovation into effect" (2). At the time, *The Angolite's* press run was approximately 1200 copies, "with over half being mailed outside" (Dec 25, 1953, 12); while such articles as these were certainly read by inmates at Angola, Sadler attempted to draw attention from non-inmate readers and staff as well. In several articles throughout his tenure as editor, he notes how more and more prison staff members, from guards to administrators, took an interest in his publication; such are the seeds of transformation, where a publication that was originally intended to mainly be read by inmates within Angola becomes a vehicle for connection between *Angolite* inmates and administrators and, eventually, inmates at other institutions as well as readers in the free world.

A few issues later, *The Angolite* published a list of Angola centered causes that they supported. Along with such desires as "meritorious good time credits," "an insurance policy...to cover and protect and indemnify any inmate injured or maimed while in performance of his duty," and "the abolition in toto of the convict-guard system and the substitution of amply paid, intelligent free guards" was a repeated call for inter-inmate dances "to be a conducive to a better morale and an incentive to behavior" (January 2, 1954, 8-9). Alongside articles that describe the problems of the Angola Tubercular Ward, a brief discussion of recent parole cases, and a report

about a new Angola fire truck, Sadler re-established his claim that “the time is long overdue for an adjustment to the sex prohibition of penal inmates, and that the lead may well be taken by Louisiana in this important direction” (9). Including this concern with other inmate grievances, along with an explicit support of the current Warden that introduces the piece (“we believe it to be the most humane, enlightened, and progressive penal management ever to be installed at Angola” [9]), is an interesting strategy; *The Angolite* shows its support for the administration and claims it to be progressive before asking for improvements that would not exist in the “old Angola” that Sadler sets as the bar for the penitentiary’s improvements over time. By showing support of their captors, the voice of the kept might have a better chance at negotiation. Whether this support is genuine is impossible, of course, to determine. But by playing into what Novek calls “the devil’s bargain” – the power relationship that administrators as publishers hold over inmate publications – *The Angolite* in this particular moment shows a keen sense of audience awareness. A few weeks later, *The Angolite* published support from two non-inmate readers for the possible success of inmate dances as part of the rehabilitative process. While both sources asked to remain anonymous, the fact that one is identified as a former LSP physician and the other a psychologist (“now attached to an upstate institution” [Feb 6, 1954, 2]) connects the claims of contained inmates to free readers positioned as experts. The former LSP physician notes that the proposed dances “conform with high theoretical expectations” (2). As I noted in Chapter One, *Angolite* writers have often included sources and even full-length articles from non-inmates as a way of supporting their claims and connecting with readers beyond the boundaries of the penal institution.⁵⁹ Such inclusions work to strengthen their arguments and show outside support for inmate writing activities.

⁵⁹ The writer of this piece notes that only “grapevine news” which could not be reported with accuracy was forthcoming from the women housed at Camp D. Obviously, from the male inmate side, the dance was widely

These articles that appeal for such entertainments as a method of curtailing homosexual activities at LSP continue until April 1954, when *The Angolite* reports on the first inmate dance ever held at LSP: “Twenty-five white men, twelve white women, and 46 colored men and an equal number of colored women, all inmates, were guests of the prison management last Sunday...The entertainment is said to be the first of its kind in penal history” (April 1, 1954, 5). As discussed in several previous articles, inmate participants were carefully selected on the basis of behavioral records, and the dance was set up as a reward. This particular article almost reads like a social news column in a free-world newspaper, presenting such details as decorations and refreshments (“sandwiches, cookies, and coffee served in the Hospital kitchen” [5]). As noted, the evening’s events were fairly segregated: “a dance between white inmates was followed by one for the colored” (5), and two separate inmate bands (“the colored ‘Rhythm Makers’ of Camp A...the white ‘Angolaires’ newly formed band from Camp E” [5]) were provided. Granted, such segregation is expected considering the time period and location, yet this event seems to have been a success with no altercations or violence – or, at least, none is reported.

As a researcher who has spent a great deal of time reading *Angolite* editions and talking with *Angolite* staff members, I can hardly even imagine such an activity taking place within the confines of a prison – especially at Angola during the 1950s. Yet what seems strangest of all is that after this particular article, there is no more discussion of inmate dances within the pages of this publication. There are no announcements for future activities, appeals for more entertainments, or even complaints if such a practice was banned by administrators. And while letters to the editor in support of the appeals for these dances were numerous, there are no published letters from either inmate or non-inmate readers that respond to the dance itself. The

supported; “There was a fringe of opinion, however, which said the idea would not work because it would be taken advantage of by a few who would spoil the dance for others” (2).

discussion of inmate dances, and inmate sexuality entirely, disappears until Rideau's account of "The Sexual Jungle" three decades later. As I noted in my introduction, many important records of *The Angolite*'s practices (such as subscription rates or interview notes) have been lost, and the only available public record of the appeals for such dances exist in *The Angolite* itself. Like the final notes of a fiddle spinning out a Cajun waltz, the narrative of these events has drifted and faded away.

I can only speculate as to why no further accounts or discussions are offered within *The Angolite* on such matters during this period. However, the position that *The Angolite* as an institution takes on sexual relations as well as the role of women during this historical moment is quite clear. At the beginning of this discussion, Sadler argues that the prison itself, with its practices of sexual segregation, is the single cause of homosexual activity. He positions homosexuality as deviant behavior and appeals to the prison authorities, via the practice of publication and circulation, to offer some sort of change in policy that would keep the male inmate population from having to resort to homosexual practices. Sadler, in this particular historical moment, understood homosexuality as a social ill that could be "cured." However, unlike the representations of homosexual activity within prisons that Sloop finds in his historical survey of popular representations during the 1950s, Sadler does not frame his discussions on this topic with fears of violence. Instead, he appeals to the dominant viewpoint that was almost certainly held by his prison administrators – that homosexuality within prisons was a detriment to rehabilitation, equivalent to a plague that had to be excised. While this representation does not include the connections between homosexuality and violence that Sloop notes throughout his account of the 1950s, it does reinforce other dominant traits of 1950s discussions of this topic in

the popular press: “Like crime, its occurrence is one of nature’s accidents; the homosexual must be transformed and renewed” (Sloop 60).

While *The Angolite* enacts many of the same practices that can be found in its coverage of other issues – such as discussing inmate concerns, detailing possible solutions, drawing upon non-inmate experts to support causes, and maintaining a voice that would not be seen as radical or muckraking by either administrators or non-inmate readers who might be skeptical of an inmate’s point of view – its coverage of homosexual activity behind bars as well as its proposed solution is clearly problematic from a contemporary vantage point. Throughout the articles, it is clear that women – delivered like supplies in a prison truck, perhaps – are positioned as subservient, existing only to quell men’s sexual desires and to provide, as Sadler notes, “the very thing that makes for a normal life – the companionship of the sexes.” Appeals to traditional Christian narratives, as seen in published letters to the editor, further strengthen this argument and solidify a connection between inmate rhetors and non-inmate readers. Homosexuality, by that same notion, is positioned as an effect caused by the lack of available women in this particular population and that can be easily “cured” via some changes in administrative policy. Inmate writers or prison administrators probably did not have any more knowledge than the general public did at the time concerning sexuality. It is clear that both Sadler and prison administrators were not fully aware of issues of violence, sexuality, and sex that feminists and sociologists are discussing today. The particular point of view articulated by *The Angolite* concerning homosexuality as problematic would probably cause little protest among either its inmate or non-inmate readership at the time. Recalling Daughtery’s testimony that introduces this section, homosexuals were seen as degenerates only.

Shifting Discourse:
From Homosexuality to AIDS and Rape

The mainstream representation of inmates via popular media outlets such as news reports and magazines, according to Sloop's historical analysis, radically changed between the 1950s – the era that produced the articles I discussed in the previous section of this chapter – and the 1970s and 1980s. As I noted in Chapter One, the most current and dominant image of the state and federal inmate is typically an unredeemable male who deserves nothing more than to be totally removed from society. While there were indeed moments during the late 1960s and 1970s where challenges were levied against the penitentiary system for incarcerating activist African-Americans such as George Jackson and Huey Newton because of “an unfair and unjust system that ignores the relativity of moral systems and holds the dominant morality to be the correct morality” (Sloop 91), such challenges were subsumed by representations that offered an image of the American inmate as “immoral and irrational...who practices violence for violence's sake, who indeed cannot control his own behavior” (91). Furthermore, as Sloop argues, one of the most dominant public representations of inmates centered on the connections between race and rape:

[During the 1970s and 1980s] There is, then, a strengthening link between the representation of the prisoner as black and as a rapist. White inmates, on the other hand, are never or rarely shown as participating in sexual activities of their own volition. Rather, they are in a constant struggle against the advances and coercion of their black counterparts. While homosexuality as a consensual – albeit aberrant – type of behavior was acknowledged in the fifties, the eras following the fifties discuss sexual behavior almost solely in terms of violence. It was possible in the 1950s to envision a homosexual Caucasian in need of reform; from that point on, however, the only sex discussed is not only coercive but coercive along racial lines – there is no homosexuality, only rape. (122)

This analysis of inmate representation is quite similar to Pinar's own understanding of how race and inmate rape are closely linked: “Prison rape is racially laced, often racially

motivated, and illustrates the conflation of gender and race...In the prisons Daniel Lockwood studied, for instance, while 50 percent of the population were black, 78 percent of the aggressors were black” (1014). While sexual attacks were once considered a by-product of homosexual inmates behind bars, as Sloop notes, the current understanding of inmate rape sees race and revenge as the driving factors. Pinar’s thorough presentation of inmate narratives reveals how inmate rape is indeed an exercise in control and dominance: “black prisoners, time and again, speak about interracial rape in historical as well as political terms. One informant said: ‘Every can I been in that’s the way it is...It’s getting’ even I guess...You guys been cuttin’ our balls off ever since we been in this country...Now we just getting’ even” (1033; Carroll 1974, 174; Bowker 1980, 92). Citing Scacco, Pinar shows that according to the research on sex in prison “to reduce a male to the status of female by forcible rape was the single most dominating thing for the black man, and the most humiliating part for the white inmate” (Scacco 1975, 90; Pinar 1069).

There is no reason to believe that rape in men’s prisons functions differently from rape in other non-prison contexts – that is, that sex is not the goal so much as the means by which the perpetrator exercises control. I should note here that academic discussions of inmate rape are connected to feminist discussions of rape and discourse in general and that these discussions help ground my own understanding of prison sex practices. Weisberg notes that serious scholarly attention to rape and its deeply rooted connections to power and dominance began in 1971 and that the subject of rape, unlike other issues that concerned the feminist movement such as abortion or prostitution, was one that united all women at that particular moment regardless of political orientation, race, and social status (405). Susan Griffin’s “Rape: the All-American Crime,” one of the earliest published radical feminist pieces that addressed this topic, describes

in both personal and scholarly terms how “rape and the fear of rape are a daily part of every woman’s consciousness” (422) – a description that can also be applied to males entering the prison system. Griffin articulates how “male society rewards aggressive, domineering sexual behavior” (425) and attacks the legal practices that offer little protection for victims. As a radical feminist, she argues that rape oppresses both individual victims as well as the larger society and sustains gender inequity:

Rape is an act of aggression in which the victim is denied her self-determination. It is an act of violence, which, if not actually followed by beatings or murder, always carries with it the threat of death. And finally, rape is a form of mass terrorism, for the victims of rape are chosen indiscriminately, but the propagandists for male supremacy broadcast that it is women who cause rape by being unchaste or in the wrong place at the wrong time – in essence by behaving as though they were free. (429)

Like Griffin, Catherine A. MacKinnon argues that rape should not be analyzed as merely a single event but rather “an act of terrorism and torture within a systemic context of group subjection” (471) – an attitude shared by writers such as Don Sabo who research prison rape and advocate for prisoner rights. As perhaps the most important legal scholar on the subjects of rape, sexual harassment, and pornography, MacKinnon investigates how the state defines and responds to rape trials as a litmus test that reveals the subordinate status of women within the United States legal system. As she argues in “Rape: On Coercion and Consent,” “The law of rape presents consent as free exercise of sexual choice under conditions of equality of power without exposing the underlying structure of constraint and disparity” (474). Rape is generally defined by law as “intercourse with force or coercion and without consent” (472), yet MacKinnon shows how “consent” is a problematic term in a male dominated society that essentially works to protect rapists in court decisions – a point also posited by Nancy Levit in her discussion of how the law can work to reinscribe stereotypes of male aggression (Sabo et al., 94).

While MacKinnon understands rape as a form of violence and control, she problematizes the interpretation of rape as only an act of violence and not sex: “The point of defining rape as ‘violence not sex’ has been to claim an ungendered and nonsexual ground for affirming sex (heterosexuality) while rejecting violence (rape). The problem remains what it has always been: telling the difference” (473). For MacKinnon, “Rape is not less sexual for being violent” (473). Furthermore, like Griffin’s earlier piece, MacKinnon argues that women are divided into categories of consent; certain females, such as young girls, are viewed as virtuous and therefore, rapable. Others, such as prostitutes, are seen as unvirtuous and, because of their lifestyle, unrapable. Wives fall into this latter category (because of their implicit sexual consent – a consent implied by their previous agreement to marry the accused, with marriage necessarily entailing sex) when the accused is the victim’s spouse, which she connects to the difficulty in prosecuting marital rape cases. While the question of who can and cannot be raped in the world of the male prison is somewhat different, MacKinnon’s discussion of how discourse (and specifically, legal discourse) shapes our societal understanding of rape informs my own understanding of how legal discourse as well as discussions by more marginalized rhetors such as *Angolite* staffers can shape or challenge public conceptions of prison sex practices.

There have been other feminist-based discussions that pinpoint how legal systems essentially deem certain forced or coerced sex acts as rape while ignoring other equally violent, horrific practices. In “Rape, Racism, and the Law,” Jennifer Wiggins traces the history of black victim/white offender and white victim/black offender rape cases in the United States. While the rape of black women was legal during the antebellum period, black males accused of raping white women were subject to lynching – a practice that continued during Reconstruction when rape statutes became officially race neutral. Such practices established a powerful legacy that

extends into the 20th and 21st centuries; “the severe statutory penalties for rape continue to be applied in a discriminatory manner” (497). Wiggins offers several examples of how rape cases that involve a white victim/black offender generally involve media sensationalism and pressures for stern and swift punishment. This historical and contemporary selective legal focus on black offenders and white victims is paired with a general dismissal of black women as victims of rape; stereotypes of “Black women’s supposed promiscuity...were used to excuse white men’s sexual abuse of Black women” during the early part of this century, and Wiggins argues that such attitudes remain well in place: “The criminal justice system continues to take the rape of Black women less seriously than the rape of white women. Studies show that judges generally impose harsher sentences for rape when the victim is white than when the victim is Black” (501). Wiggins notes that certain strategies designed to combat rape, such as working toward increased convictions, can have unintended effects such as racial profiling in rape investigations. “Because of the interconnectedness of rape and racism,” she argues, “successful work against rape and other sexual coercion must deal with racism” (505).

Although the articles that I have noted here hardly represent the breadth and depth of over three decades worth of feminist discussions of rape, it should be clear that the central aspects of this larger conversation include control, dominance, and subjugation – the very same aspects that fuel male-on-male prison rape (which includes acts that might be viewed as consensual such as protective pairing). Furthermore, these discussions highlight the power of such factors as legal and race-based discourse in the public understanding of rape. Sabo et al. connect their own discussion of sexual violence within prison (as well as the implied tacit approval of such acts) to larger discussions of rape:

Feminists argue that rape is more about power and violence than it is about sex...[T]he reality of weaker male prisoners being

controlled and raped by stronger male prisoners contains similar elements of domination and subjugation...Despite the prevalence of prison rape, prison officials and civilians often deny or fail to recognize it. The cultural silence surrounding man-on-man prison rape sustains common definitions of rape as a sexual act rather than an act of personal and political domination. It can also be argued that, just as the extent and severity of men's sexual violence against women are often tolerated or tacitly condoned in our dominant culture, so too is men's sexual violence against men in prison often denied or avoided by policy makers, reformers, and social scientists (109-10).

This notion of silence did not only apply to non-inmates. While Sloop shows that the practice of inmate rape gained enormous attention in popular representations of prisons and prisoners from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, discussion of inmate sexual practices and specifically inmate rape is suspiciously absent in *The Angolite* during this period. This is not to say that *The Angolite* did not take on difficult subjects that are connected to inmate sexuality; for example, Ron Wikberg's "Sex and Politics" (July/August 1987, 23-24) covers false allegations concerning widespread rape at the Louisiana Correctional and Industrial School. *The Angolite* also published a number of articles on the subject of AIDS within prison populations throughout the 1980s that performed a number of functions, such as educating inmates on the nature of AIDS, disseminating information about prison policies, and even challenging administrative positions. Some articles, such as "AIDS in Prison: Coping With A Strange New Death Penalty" (March/April 1986, 27), were reprinted from other prison publications – a practice that Morris notes in his historical account as an important element of the penal press. This particular piece recounts the discussion among state prisons at the time over mandatory AIDS testing and describes the psychological effects of AIDS rumors on specific prison populations and the justice system as a whole:

A prison employee in the East collected an AIDS inmate's mail with a plastic bag attached to a broom. A parole officer asked her AIDS

parolee to skip his regular visits to her office and ‘just call in.’ In San Antonio, County Judge Tony Himenez arraigned a prisoner tested positive for AIDS in his jail cell so that the courtroom and staff would not be contaminated. (27)

Granted, such pieces were published during the earliest days of AIDS, and such precautions certainly seem extreme from our own current vantage point. Other articles were essentially short news briefs written by *Angolite* staffers that discussed changes in policy at other prisons; for example, a (January/February 1987) update, entitled “Sex in Prison,” notes that while states such as New York and even Mississippi were experimenting with conjugal visitation programs “as a move to prevent the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases” (12), Louisiana refused to allow conjugal visitations; these restrictions are still currently in place.⁶⁰ *Angolite* articles at this time also advocated for other changes in prison policy, such as the distribution of condoms; most prison administrators throughout the United States at that time argued that “giving out condoms would condone homosexuality, just as distributing sterile syringes would condone drug abuse” (‘AIDS in Prison’ 27).

Other articles, such as “The AIDS Menace” published in July/August 1987 and co-authored by Rideau and Ron Wikberg, discussed the concerns of inmates and administrators alike on the subject of AIDS and prisoner populations: “Because of the pervasive homosexuality found among prisoner populations, the nation’s prisons have been regarded as fertile soil for AIDS, which is most often transmitted through homosexual intercourse or shared drug needles” (35). Again, knowledge about the spread of AIDS was incredibly limited at the time of this

⁶⁰ Mumia Abu-Jamal, in his essay “Caged and Celibate,” notes that only California, Connecticut, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, and Washington offer “some degree of conjugal visitation” (139).

published piece.⁶¹ Like “AIDS in Prison,” much of this article chronicles the debate over mandatory HIV testing among prison populations – with a specific focus on Angola itself. An interview with Dr. Vance Byars, the chief medical consultant for the Louisiana Department of Corrections at the time, takes up the majority of the first half of the article. Speaking on behalf of the state, he argues that mandatory testing would be far too costly an endeavor and would not be productive: “Let’s assume that we decided to go ahead and test all of the prisoners in the correction system...and we came up with a fairly sizable number of positives, what would we do with them?” (39). Most of Byars’ statements are concerned with educating prison employees on the subject of HIV and AIDS; while this topic is certainly less titillating than accounts of inmate sexual practices, the mere fact that inmate writers are granted face-to-face access with a high-ranking administrator reflects the highly regarded status of *The Angolite* within the microcosm of Angola prison. In articles such as these, *Angolite* writers position themselves as able to educate readers on medical issues as well as explain prison policy to their inmate readers. While these writers maintain a journalistic tone in their reporting, it is clear that they see the role of inmate publications as crucial in disseminating information about the role of AIDS within prison populations.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this particular article is a profile of Ronald Waymire, “a 26-year old inmate serving a 35-year sentence for an attempted aggravated rape in St. Tammany Parish” (42). Waymire self-identifies as having a sexual history with both women and men before his incarceration and, according to the article, learned that he had AIDS while serving time in Covington, LA. Upon his transfer to Angola, he admits to his fellow inmates that he has AIDS: “None of [the inmates] wanted to be around me. They wanted me off the tier right

⁶¹ According to the National Institute of Justice, there were 1,232 confirmed cases of AIDS among United States prisoners in 1986, as compared to 766 cases in 1985 – a 61% increase. See *The Angolite*, “The AIDS Menace,” July/August 1987, 35.

away...They thought I was jeopardizing their lives” (42). Pressured by inmates, Waymire was moved several times during his first ten months at LSP. Yet despite his ostracism, Waymire confesses that he has had sexual relations with other inmates during his LSP sentence (even while confined at Camp J, with the most secure penal conditions in the state of Louisiana): “When they let me out of my cell for an hour, I’d have sex with them through the bars with it hanging out. That’s how I got caught the last time...I was giving him a blow-job. I’ve given head to two guys and one guy I had intercourse with me through the bars” (43).

Waymire’s narrative has a number of possible effects. First, it shows that sexual practices do indeed exist behind bars despite administrative restrictions; it forces readers to confront depictions of inmate sex acts despite cultural fears concerning the hidden nature of life behind bars. It also somewhat challenges administrative attitudes concerning AIDS and prison policy; Rideau notes that prison administrators rarely, if ever, discuss anything related to sex behind bars (“The Sexual Jungle,” 60). While inmates at this time were shown educational films concerning AIDS prevention, “there was no medical personnel on hand to answer questions from the inmates” (46) and “no program exists to educate new arrivals [such as Waymire] on the subject of AIDS” (47). Waymire, in his interview, states that “no one has ever explained AIDS to him nor has he read any literature or seen any films on the subject” (43). While *The Angolite* maintains journalistic neutrality, it is clear that these writers are able to use writing and publishing to argue for better prison policies. The role of *The Angolite*, in this case, is to draw attention of administrators, outside readers, and even other inmates to issues that affect prisoners.

Perhaps the most important possible effect of this narrative is sympathy; Waymire is portrayed as a victim within the worst of possible situations: “Waymire is correct in his assessment that no one wants to make friends with him, neither the inmates nor the officers who

must deal with him on a personal basis” (43). The article shows how Camp J inmates attempted to file a suit with the 19th Judicial District Court that would “force Angola to do something about and with Waymire” (44); a few anonymous death threats on Waymire’s life are also noted. As Waymire states, “I do need some help, you know...I want some help. And being locked up, you know, no one is there really to help you. I mean, you’re just a goner. And I’m pretty much by myself. I don’t know nobody and it seems like everybody is all against me” (43). Considering the face-to-face nature of this interview, as noted in the article, this is indeed a powerful statement. As in many cases that I have noted throughout this study, *The Angolite* works to humanize inmates beyond mere stereotype.

However, recalling Sloop and Pinar’s respective analyses of inmate sexuality that I noted at the beginning of this section, this set of articles places emphasis on AIDS as a medical condition and, in the case of Ronald Waymire, an inmate who identifies himself as having homosexual tendencies rather than forcible rape or acts of power and dominance; at moments, these articles implicitly argue for reforms at the administrative level concerning AIDS prevention and the overall treatment of inmates who are victims of discrimination for any reason. Here, *Angolite* writers work as advocates; although their topic choices differ from what Sloop sees as the dominant issues concerning inmate sexual life, they take on issues that they see as important to their own community.

While the question of inmate rape and sex-based slavery only takes center stage once in the entire run of *Angolite* editions, its publication and dissemination was a landmark moment in *Angolite* history. Wilbert Rideau’s lengthy essay “The Sexual Jungle,” one of *The Angolite*’s most famous pieces of writing (nominated for a 1980 National Magazine Award, winner of the 1980 George Polk Award, and reprinted in the Rideau and Wikberg edited anthology *Life*

Sentences), is perhaps the most graphic depiction of inmate rape to appear in any edition of *The Angolite*. It is a hybrid genre – part inmate profile, part interview with prison officials, part analysis, all fuelled with hard details that are certainly designed to evoke sympathy for inmates trapped within the brutal cycle of rape and power. While this article is indeed the first explicit account of prison rape and prison sexuality in general within the pages of *The Angolite*, as I noted already, this piece performs many of the same functions as other *Angolite* accounts. It offers details (and fairly gruesome ones, at that) of the prison world that are fairly hidden from the public eye. It attempts to show Angola inmates as human beings with individual circumstances and who are worthy of sympathy. It appeals, if only implicitly, for changes within the larger world of penal regulations as well as the specific space of Louisiana State Penitentiary. Finally, it offers at least one account of an inmate who is transformed into a person who is willing and able to contribute something meaningful to his fellow inmates despite his own limited agency as a prisoner and his former status as a victim. As readers, we are shown detailed accounts of rape, virtual slavery, and violence that position inmates as victims of a power system that is maintained by both the administration in their tolerance of such acts as well as the inmates themselves. Rideau, like other *Angolite* writers on this topic, attempts to give a voice to the voiceless. While it is difficult to understand why the inmates Rideau profiles within this piece might allow themselves to be profiled (with their names and detailed accounts) – considering the potential risks – their testimonies are positioned within the essay to show how this practice works against rehabilitation and, instead, perpetuates violence.

Early in the essay, Rideau dismisses the commonly held notion as seen in earlier *Angolite* articles that inmate rape is “something only done by homosexual ‘perverts,’ sickos slobbering at the mouth for an attractive young boy” (52). Instead, like Pinar and other scholars of the

discourse of prison rape, he posits that “rape and other sexual violence in prison has little to do with ‘heterosexuality’ or ‘homosexuality’ ...rape is a deadly serious affair in the pained world behind bars, almost always a matter of power and control – and often, of life and death” (52). Here, we are shown a clear case of historical consciousness; Rideau’s shifts in tone and perspective reflect shifts in the larger society when it comes to the topic of rape. Although Pinar postulates that inmate rape is connected to latent homosexual desire, he does not deny that rape, both in prison and in the free world, is clearly connected to issues of power and control, a connection that Rideau threads throughout the profiles and interview sections that are the center of “The Sexual Jungle.” It could be argued that Rideau, like other inmate-journalists, positions himself as a Virgil to our collective Dante – our guide, as outsiders, through the darkest recesses of the prison. While Rideau’s descriptions are not surprising, their level of detail is striking and merit quotation at some length:

Leaving the bullpen, he strolled toward the cell area. Stepping into the darkened cell, he was swept into a whirlwind of violent movement that flung him hard against the wall, knocking the wind from him. A rough, callused hand encircled his throat, the fingers digging painfully into his neck, cutting off the scream rushing to his lips. ‘Holler, whore, and you die,’ a hoarse voice warned, the threat emphasized by the knife point at his throat. He nodded weakly as a rag was stuffed in his mouth. The hand left his neck...An anguished prayer formed in his heart, and his facial muscles twitched uncontrollably. He was thrown on the floor, his pants pulled off of him...His throat grunted painful noises, an awful pleading whine that went ignored as he felt his buttocks spread roughly apart. A searing pain raced through his body as the hardness of one of his attackers tore roughly into his rectum. ‘Shake back, bitch!’ a voice urged. ‘Give him a wiggle!’...his body flinched and quivered from the burning cigarettes being applied to his side by other inmates watching. A sense of helplessness overwhelmed him and he began to cry...overwhelmed with the knowledge that it was not over, that this was only the beginning of a nightmare that would only end with violence, death, or release from prison. (51)

Rideau shows the flair of the expert novelist here, capturing not only the horrific nature of the action but the inmate's understanding of how such a practice is rarely a single, one time event. The evocative nature of his graphic details, his prose rhythm, and his well-selected verb choices (the combination of "flinched" and "quivered," for example, ring with a prosody held by the most expert of poets) make it hard to believe that Rideau has rarely been included in anthologies of inmate prose aside from his own *Life Sentences*. It is also interesting how Rideau shows a disassociation of sorts between the inmate and his own body during this act; it is "his throat" that produces the groans of pain and shame and not the inmate himself, and "his body" reacts, almost uncontrollably. Only at the end, where we are shown that "he began to cry" (51) does the inmate and his body come back together – at the moment of understanding that this rape was not an isolated incident. Rideau's representation of the act reflects a distancing between the body that is raped and the mind that is forced to cope with the perpetual shame that will come with this almost never-ending cycle. While this passage, the paragraph that introduces "The Sexual Jungle," is clearly a composite account and not attributed to any specific inmate (unlike other passages) the sentences "flinch" and "quiver" with the power of testimony – a voice that is trying to show readers beyond the ideologically and physically closed barriers of the prison world the horror that is usually concealed.

The practice of prison rape, Rideau argues, is so concealed that it is not even referred to as "rape" by Angola inmates or staff: "both prisoners and personnel generally refer to the act as 'turning out,' a nonsexual description that reveals the nonsexual ritualistic nature of what is really an act of conquest" (53). And much of Rideau's article is aimed at showing how prison rape is connected to issues of power – a connection that is hardly denied by prison officials, despite their hesitance to confront such problems. Rideau incorporates interviews with both C.

Paul Phelps, then secretary of the Louisiana Department of Corrections, and LSP Chief of Security Colonel Walter Pence. Pence is quoted as stating that he had never investigated a case of inmate rape that was “just an act of passion” (52): “It’s basically one guy saying to another: ‘I’m a better man than you and I’m gonna turn you out to prove it’” (52). Phelps, with a somewhat more distanced tone, is represented as pointing out throughout his interview-based portion of “The Sexual Jungle” that inmates involved in prison rape practices are not “medically or clinically homosexual” (60) and that “sex and power go hand in hand in prison” (53).

Rideau’s statement rings with more recent claims about the practice of prison rape and the role of destructive forms of masculinity:

...the existing prison system serves to reproduce destructive forms of masculinity. Rather than reduce crime, imprisonment in the United States today perpetuates men’s violent proclivities. The abandonment of rehabilitation and the embracement of punishment by contemporary corrections exacerbates class, race, and gender antagonisms, thereby creating more toxic confrontations between elite males and lesser-status males. (Sabo et al. 4-5)

The linguistic gymnastics does not stop at just the phrase “turning out.” “Sharp class lines divide the prisoners” Rideau points out, “who are ‘men’ (‘studs,’ ‘wolves,’ ‘jocks,’ and so forth) and those who are slaves (‘whores,’ ‘turnouts,’ ‘galboys,’ ‘prisoners,’ ‘kids,’ ‘bitches,’ ‘punks,’ ‘old ladies)’” (57). Rideau’s acute awareness of this caste system – a gendered caste system with the latter of these terms all synonymous with weakness and the feminine resonates with Pinar’s claims. Both writers – the inmate-journalist and the acclaimed scholar – show how such terminology identifies prisoners on a scale of dominance or passivity, weakness or strength, and, most importantly for our purposes here, male or female; Gordon James Knowles’ recent article “Male Prison Rape: A Search for Causation and Prevention” from the *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* also examines the language of prison rape in terms of power and as part of the

social structure (a “pecking order” of sorts) of the prison sexual subculture. The usage of “slave” as a term holds particular interest in the context of Angola’s origins as a plantation, its history as part of the penal lease system, and even its current status as a penal farm, although this term certainly extends beyond the physical and linguistic world of Louisiana State Penitentiary. However, Rideau does not make this connection between sexual slavery and Angola’s historical context explicit, nor does he challenge the problematic connection of such terminology with women who would be, as he states, “providing [men] the gratification of their needs...in the normal world” (52). Whether intended or not, Rideau – like Sadler in the earlier *Angolite* articles, only positions women as sexual servants. Terms such as “old ladies” merely reproduce gender binaries that generally exist in Western culture, yet none of this is challenged. While this article does indeed argue for a better public understanding of inmate life and the violence that is inherently a part of it, it re-inscribes stereotypes that maintain gender binaries within both the free world and in the prison world.

Much of the early part of Rideau’s article is dedicated to profiling one of these feminized “slaves.” James Dunn, the Angola inmate whose words from the documentary film *Louisiana Prison: Angola* introduce this chapter, is portrayed as one of the exceptions to the rule of total sex/slave control. Yet his freedom from sexual slavery came at a huge cost – an extension of his five-year sentence to a life sentence for murder while in custody. Dunn, a repeat offender who had spent a short stint at Angola for burglary, was raped immediately after his initial arrival; this act was his rapist’s way of claiming him for his own, an act that Rideau argues is far from uncommon. Dunn claims that after that initial incident, he witnessed, “fourteen guys rape one youngster ‘cause he refused to submit...When they finished with him, he had to be taken to the hospital where they had to sew him back up” (54). The stomach-turning details in this passage,

like many other moments within “The Sexual Jungle,” are clearly part of Rideau’s appeal for outsider understanding. But this description, as frightening as it is, is hardly the end of Dunn’s narrative.

Knowing that such a fate awaited him unless he found a method of survival, Dunn became the slave of his rapist – a common practice for inmates upon entering the penitentiary. As his “old lady,” Dunn took care of several tasks that can be seen as stereotypically the role of a wife: washing clothes, making beds, preparing meals, giving massages, and, of course, sexually satisfying his man. “My only protection” from gang rape, Dunn argues, “was in sticking with my old man, the guy who raped me” (54).⁶² As I have already noted, there is little that authorities can do to protect inmates such as Dunn from this brutal practice; to “rat” on his fellow inmates breaks the implied inmate code of silence, and studies such as Pinar’s show numerous examples of correctional officers who willingly allow inmate rapes to occur.⁶³ Rideau points out here what he sees as one of the major differences between rape in prison and in the free world: few rape victims outside of the prison environment must repay their rapist and even act grateful while acknowledging that there is little available help from authority figures.

⁶² An interesting text to consider here is Stephen Donaldson’s pamphlet “Hooking Up: Protective Pairing for Punks.” As a former president of Stop Prisoner Rape, he provides a set of instructions for how to carefully choose an inmate “jockey” for protection in exchange for sexual favors as well as other duties (“doing laundry, cleaning his cell, making up his bunk, fixing coffee for him, or giving him backrubs”) as a method of evading gang rapes for straight inmates entering the prison system. He demarcates the “rules” for such relationships, noting the difficulty of taking on the identity of a female for the pleasures of another inmate, a “Daddy.” Often, the “punk” will have little leverage or choice, especially if the prison where he is housed has a strong gang presence; an inmate can easily be forced into being the “wife” of an entire gang. Such an arrangement has its advantages, such as more protection from assault from other inmates, but this is generally seen as merely a more gentle form of gang rape. Donaldson knows first-hand the difficulties of inmate rape; during a brief imprisonment after a nonviolent protest, he was raped by approximately sixty men in twenty-four hours. Although he became a strong advocate for inmate rights, he seemed to transform into a criminal and ended up in jail several more times before he became infected with H.I.V. and died of A.I.D.S. related complications in 1996. “Stephen Donaldson” was the assumed name for Richard Anthony Martin; he also occasionally wrote punk music-oriented articles for such publications as *Maximum RocknRoll* and *Flipside* under the name “Donny the Punk.” See www.spr.org and Pinar, 1016.

⁶³ Pinar recalls a particularly shocking narrative in which “a prisoner screamed for over an hour while he was gang-raped in his cell within earshot of a correctional officer. Not only did the guard ignore the screams but he laughed as the young man, shaken, stumbled from his cell afterward” (1065).

Because of his rapist's heroin habit – the rapist is never named in the article for understandable reasons of Dunn's safety – Dunn was sold for one hundred and fifty dollars but immediately bought back "because he was loving me" (54). This statement – as part of his testimony to Rideau and, by extension, to all inmate and non-inmate readers – seems to run counter to Phelps' and other prison administrators' claims that inmate sexual relations are based only in power and not passion, yet Rideau allows this connection to remain implicit.

When Dunn returned to Angola for another burglary, his former owner let him know that things had not changed. Dunn knew that he could not tell prison authorities – "all they'd do is tell you that since you were already a whore, they couldn't do nothing for you, and for you to go back to the dorm and settle down and be a good old lady" (55) – and his rapist had a clique to back up his power. Rideau provides support to both his own discussion and Dunn's narrative by citing an interview with Dr. Frank R. Rundle, then chief psychiatrist at the California Training Facility at Soledad. Rundle notes that in his facility as well as all penal institutions, those inmates who speak out against such sexual violence only set themselves up to be killed or badly hurt or having to submit to protective custody for their entire sentence – a status that is not only mentally crippling, Rideau argues, but also one that keeps inmates from participating in any prison-provided activities or educational programs. Furthermore, such an act, in the world of the inmate belief system according to Rideau, only works to further emasculate the inmate; a "real man" would be able to fend off predators and not have to succumb to becoming a wife/slave in order to survive. While Rideau never directly challenges how these issues are essentially caused by the administration, he does assert via connecting with Rundle's voice as an outsider and non-inmate professional expert that "the almost natural inclination of the institutional security force is

to be tolerant of any type of situation that divides the prisoners into predators and prey” (62) as a way of preventing any sort of pan-prison unity.

This extreme violence is part of Dunn’s continuing story. Although normally a slave is sold or given to other inmates upon the owner’s release, continuing the cycle of abuse and power, Dunn was set free; quickly, other inmates moved in on Dunn to claim him as property. Dunn confesses that he was involved in at least fifteen to twenty fights within four months; in the end, only the killing of one of his attackers stopped the cycle: “I was finally free,” Dunn states, “but it cost like hell” (56). There is a certain irony in having to commit a murder within the walls of the penitentiary – a murder that will increase a sentence and restrict an inmate’s ability to participate in activities – in order to gain some semblance of freedom. Yet Dunn’s actions are framed by Rideau as a way of maintaining his masculinity; the narrative is hardly even challenged, as Rideau notes, “It wasn’t difficult for him to find the determination to stick to his resolution to be a man” (55-56). In this case, masculinity is constructed and maintained by further acts of violence that are, essentially, fuelled by the general administrative lack of concern, as argued by Sabo et al.:

the existing prison system serves to reproduce destructive forms of masculinity. Rather than reduce crime, imprisonment in the United States today perpetuates men’s violent proclivities. The abandonment of rehabilitation and the embracement of punishment by contemporary corrections exacerbates class, race, and gender antagonisms, thereby creating more toxic confrontations. (4-5)

Dunn’s violence led to an eighteen-month stay in solitary and a life sentence. And as in many moments within *The Angolite*’s pages, we are shown an inmate’s epiphany:

Man, I got to thinking that this was all so futile...I wanted to get out of prison, but I was just getting deeper and deeper into it. And it was there that I decided that, no matter what happened, I would

do everything in my power to try to prevent what happened to me from happening to other kids. (56)

At the end of his section of the article, Dunn is positioned as a big brother – and not a slave owner – for younger, incoming inmates who could easily fall prey to the traps that ruled most of Dunn’s sentence. Rideau summarizes Dunn’s contributions that are not accounted for by official prison programs, such as informing inmates about the rules of “The Sexual Jungle” and loaning money to newer arrivals for basic needs such as toothpaste or deodorant (so that they wouldn’t have to work for prison pimps or indebted themselves to sexual slavery). Dunn’s salvation narrative extends beyond the boundaries of prison as well; he is shown conducting Green Stamps fund drives to help the Lafayette Juvenile and Young Adult Program; a photograph of a smiling James Dunn presenting a check to Lafayette Juvenile and Young Adult Program officials accompanies this part of the article. Once he was approved for outside travel (a practice that is rather rare these days), “Dunn took his tragic tale to Louisiana schoolkids as part of an Angola Jaycees juvenile crime-prevention program, telling them about his experiences as a slave...pleading with them to obey the law and stay out of prison” (57). In short, Dunn (and Rideau by his coverage of such narratives) is positioned as trying to stop the cycle of prison rape despite his relative lack of agency within the penitentiary system. Everything Dunn does for his peers and those on the outside, he does on his own; such actions are publicized by *The Angolite* as part of their resistance to dominant stereotypes of inmates. Instead of serving the rest of his sentence as a dominated victim of sexual violence (or, even scarier, as a predator of younger, weaker inmates coming into the system), Dunn takes on the role of educator – a role that is documented by Rideau’s writing.

As we saw in Chapter Three, Angola inmates are often shown within the pages of *The Angolite* as trying to improve both their own lives and the lives of their fellow inmates. This

theme, perhaps one of the most important themes within the pages of this publication, is deployed time and time again as a way of showing readers that inmates are more than just inmates, damned to live within a system defined by their public representations. Furthermore, Dunn's attempts to help others outside of Angola – his fund raising and educational efforts – challenge our limited understanding of inmate life as well. Again, it is easy to argue that the examples of positive contributions within the Angola community are simply exceptions to the rule, that Angola is indeed a world of monsters. Rideau and other writers do not deny the violence of their shared space, but they also offer depictions of inmates involved with efforts such as Dunn's as a way of resisting the totalizing discourse of inmate life and behavior that is shown via public media.

Dunn is not the only inmate profiled within "The Sexual Jungle." A few pages are dedicated to Rideau's memories of "Silky," an inmate pimp who justified his harsh practices by arguing that the money he made was used "to meet the expenses involved in his effort to secure his freedom. Ruining the lives of the two youngsters by making them prostitutes was immaterial" (58). While Rideau does not explicitly pass judgment on Silky or his practices, the descriptions and dialogue he recalls are chilling – another appeal for reader sympathy. Silky, unsurprisingly, participates in the language code that both Rideau and Pinar describe:

Man, you know how them bitches is...Ah tell the bitch to make me twenty dollars, and the bitch come back with fifteen...Ah wish Ah didn't have to do this...but Ah ain't got no choice. I'm fighting for my freedom and Ah can't support myself and pay my lawyer on the two cents an hour the state gives me. So it's either Ah stay here with them, or Ah use them to get myself out of here. (58)

This raw, harsh language is one of the subjects taken up by Cardozo-Freeman. While outsiders, according to her account, tend to describe "uncomfortable aspects of prisons in euphemistic terms" (Pinar 1020), prisoners do not employ such etiquette:

They strip language down to its bare bones, revealing it in all its rawness. In these instances, prisoners are truth tellers, stripping away all hypocrisy and patina from meaning in language. Often their language, shocking as it may be, more truthfully reveals the human condition...Because their daily existence is filled with ugliness, they do not fear ugly language. (Cardozo-Freedman 28)

Silky's whores made him around six hundred dollars a month, and, according to Rideau, the pimp was successful in getting out of prison by using this money for legal fees. The juxtaposition of Silky's and Dunn's narratives are striking; while one uses others to get out of the prison system, the other is positioned as almost saintly – a survivor of years of abuse who now works to help others. Such inclusion is an example of how *Angolite* writers, and Rideau in particular, do not simply use their publication as a showcase for “feel-good” stories, but it is easy to see how Rideau champions works such as Dunn's.

Rideau, and *The Angolite* by extension, also champions those inmates who openly claim to be homosexuals within the prison community, “a small class of prisoners who are locked up simply because of what they are” (69). Rideau exposes how these inmates are locked up and segregated from the main prison population for what the prison authorities say is “protection.” Four homosexual inmates are profiled within Rideau's article, all of whom express a desire to live and work in general population. “When I came to Angola,” argues Gary “Shelia” Keyton, “and arrived at AU [Admissions Unit], they looked at me and my record and just bluntly told me that I was a whore and that I go to Camp H lockdown, giving me no choice in the matter” (70). Rideau, in this case, uses writing to challenge how homosexuals are labeled – and then segregated – by prison authorities. Another inmate, Calvin “Carol” Clark, notes that, “I feel that if we need protection, we can ask for it...I've got time to serve and it's hard doing time like this...I want to go down The Walk, choose an old man, and do my time peacefully and constructively” (71). Rideau also notes that self-identified homosexuals are denied job

assignments that fit their qualifications; Sheila, “a high school graduate with two years of training in air-conditioning and refrigeration” (75), is ignored by administrators despite her multiple letters requesting a work assignment that would benefit all parties: “They’ll let your old man go to the Police Barracks [for work detail]” Sheila argues, “but not you, because you are a homosexual” (75). Here, we see an official recognition of the inmate sexual code: dominant, more powerful partners are viewed as male; Sheila, like her counterparts who also offer testimony in this article, are seen as female and, therefore, worthless.

This recurring theme of wanting to be constructive while in prison, like the end of Dunn’s account, is highlighted throughout Rideau’s portrayal of the homosexual community – a segregated population within a segregated population who are “denied access to the prison’s education and vocational programs and...carry the social stigma of being a ‘catch-out,’ a ‘rat,’ a ‘coward’” (71) because of inmate-held associations with protective custody. Rideau draws on his interviews with prison officials who argue that inmates who claim homosexual status are likely to cause trouble within general population. Yet he counters such an argument with testimony from Gwen White, another subject in his range of profiles: “it depends upon the individual – she can be a lady or a whore. She can conduct herself where she don’t create chaos, confusion, or conflict, or she can constantly keep trouble stirred up” (72). Using this piece of dialogue is Rideau’s attempt to work against the totalizing view of homosexual inmates as a single mass rather than individual cases. Furthermore, Rideau challenges, if only implicitly, the long-held belief that the presence of women – such as conjugal visits, or even the inmate-dances proposed by Sadler three decades earlier – would reduce inmate male-male sexual relations; “While it wouldn’t end it,” Colonel Pense (Angola Chief of Security) argues, “I feel that a lot of the homosexual activities could be reduced through a conjugal-visiting program tied into the

disciplinary system” (75). Despite such a controversial idea, it is clear that the administration at that moment could *only* speak about inmate sexual activity as homosexual – not as acts of power or control that, as Rideau argues, are almost impossible to curtail via administrative control.

Again, Rideau’s discussion of “The Sexual Jungle,” fuelled by sympathy-evoking profiles as well as graphic descriptions, indeed challenges both administrative perspectives on inmate sexuality and the general public’s lack of support for inmate needs. But, as I have noted, the presentation of such acts as well as the language used almost seems to reinforce notions of women that are not only problematic but also potentially destructive. Furthermore, the question of race – the defining aspect of inmate rape according to scholars such as Pinar and Sloop – is suspiciously absent. Pinar argues that prison rape is almost always racially motivated – a disturbing form of revenge for 300 years of oppression. In a larger argument, he shows via various historical accounts how “racism is in some sense an ‘affair’ between men” (2). He draws upon narratives of lynching and prison rape to deconstruct the homoerotic nature that connects race relations and gender in the United States. It is a project of historical witnessing, accounting for the patterns of violence that mark the entire history of blacks in North America. Pinar shows this brutal practice to be “a mangled form of queer sex, a fact inaccessible, one supposes, to those white men who participated in the practice” (11). In prison, he argues, black men performed the exact same, yet inverted, act of gendered violence: “If white racism is both expressed and experienced as sexualized, as an assault on ‘manhood,’ would we not predict that if there were an opportunity for political revenge, some black men might choose sex as the medium? In American prisons we find exactly that” (17).

While Pinar’s argument is engaged with both race and gender constructions and emphasizes the political nature of black-on-white male inmate rape (drawing upon numerous

sociological studies such as Scacco's) and while Sloop offers numerous examples of public representations of inmate sexuality where African-American males are positioned as prime aggressors who "cannot be redeemed, only punished" (122), Rideau's account does not connect rape to race at all in any radical sense. Although Rideau does briefly mention 1968 study by Philadelphia Chief Assistant District Attorney Alan Davis that shows a larger number of black-on-white inmate rapes, he does not posit any argument as to how race plays into the practice of inmate rape within his own community; the critical element of race is given a glance, nothing more. Combined with the way that Dunn's narrative – the centerpiece of the article – is presented, with his testimony offered as a series of memories that have been overcome and that are safely located in a historical past, it would be easy to conjecture that Rideau's move here is the best of possible choices. Considering the violent nature of Angola, and all maximum-security prisons as noted by numerous scholars, Rideau's choice to briefly note yet not emphasize the racial dimension of inmate rape (which is offered within outsider, scholarly accounts and not his own postulations or observations) allows him to argue that race is indeed a factor without drawing attention to the space where he is contained and controlled. Recalling one of his recent statements that I noted in Chapter One, "Let's face it – if you want to continue publishing you can't alienate the authority." Furthermore, such a choice allows Rideau to avoid angering black inmates within his own prison – a space with a long history of racial frictions.

Yet despite this problematic absence of race as a prime factor within inmate rape practices as well as the re-inscription of gender binaries that are present both within "The Sexual Jungle" as well as earlier *Angolite* articles that posit possible solutions to "the homosexual problem," it is clear that such pieces – especially Rideau's – carry the same purpose as all *Angolite* articles. As I noted throughout this chapter, the general public knows little about the actual day-to-day life in

the world behind bars. While television programs, films, and prison-oriented novels attempt to render this world to a non-inmate audience, few of these texts are authored by inmates themselves. Here, and in the entire history of this publication, we are given narratives and analyses from those most effected by the prison system. “The deprivation of basic human needs imposed upon prisoners and the violence resulting from that deprivation” Rideau argues, “have created a horrible situation in the nation’s jails and prisons” (78).

While Rideau is writing about human sexual needs in this instance, such an argument can be extended to other needs that are just as human – the need to tell one’s own story, to be seen as a human being despite past offences and mistakes: “It would be easy to blame the whole affair on prisoners, to use the violent situation as proof that they’re criminals or animals and justification for the present penal practices. But their behavior merely reflects their desperation” (78). In the entire history of *The Angolite*, as I have shown throughout this project, readers are shown representations of inmates working and struggling against the numbing desperation that is indicative of the long-term prison experience. Although there are few venues for inmates to voice their own concerns, *The Angolite* works to fight both dominant representations of inmates and the desperation that plagues the prison existence.

Fourth Count – How I Got Kicked Out of Prison

It seems somewhat fitting that one of my last memories of my field research at Angola involves a funeral. All the way home back to Baton Rouge that day, the voices of the prisoners rang in my head. The image of these men – in song, in tears – radically differed from the images of inmates and Angola that I had imagined before my journey in this project began. As I drove, I thought of the accounts I had read in *The Angolite* about how prison funerals were performed in the early years of the prison – mass, unmarked graves with no pretence of ceremony or reverence. What I had witnessed was an act of dignity that shook me to my core. That dignity was provided by Warden Cain, who had been the main force to improve prison funerals. About half the inmates who die at Angola will be buried at Angola, and Cain has been known to say that once a man dies, his sentence is complete and there should be dignity in his burial. While Cain has been critiqued in the media by the ACLU and other groups, as I noted in Chapter One, I couldn't help but consider his actions for a moment – how much the chance to grieve with peers at the gravesite means to these men.

Again, the fact that I was invited to participate in such a personal act as the burial of a friend gave me the sense that I was beginning to make a connection with the staffers. Trust was developing. And I had begun to trust them. The interview and observation visits in the weeks before the funeral had gone quite well. Myers always spoke candidly about his writing process, about how the staff chooses topics collaboratively and divides the workload. He offered recollections of emotionally difficult stories and the frustrations of dealing with antiquated computers and layout equipment; tools that journalists in the free world use every day, such as internet access, were not available to these writers. We also talked about his previous

assignment at the Angola print shop and how certain skills he acquired there had been useful in his relatively new position as editor. At times, we talked about the Rideau retrial that was currently taking place in Calcasieu Parish; sometimes he talked about his children or his work with hospice or the Human Relations Club or the Episcopal Church in the prison.

Hillburn and I had begun to spend more time together as well. Once, he spoke of some benefits of his position that I had never considered. Writing for *The Angolite* as a full time staffer clearly had its immediate perks: a work assignment that did not totally revolve around an imposed daily schedule like farm labor or the print shop; a certain degree of freedom to move about the prison facility without a constant guard presence; increased access to reading materials as part of the staff's research needs; a degree of recognition among the inmate population. Yet this recognition isn't always easy. Rideau, in interviews with Morris, speaks of how inmates were often afraid of his questions and camera. Hillburn offered a similar account: *Some guys here, they think our job is easy. And it's certainly different than other jobs that are assigned here. But for us, it's different. When they're done with work, they go back to the dorms and have their own time. They leave work at work. But for us, we're always working, always thinking about the magazine and what needs to be done.*

Still, despite this openness from Myers, Hilburn, Nelson, and other staffers to a lesser degree, I knew that I had not been completely accepted by the entire *Angolite* staff by that point. Some staffers mainly worked at night, and I rarely saw them. Clarence Goodlowe was still quite polite but remained quiet when I was in the office. Douglass Dennis, better known as "Swede," approved of my project but was hesitant to offer much. Swede was fairly famous around the prison; he had escaped once and had evaded authorities for years, only to be recaptured by getting pulled over for speeding. He is considered to be the unofficial historian of LSP, and I

hoped to learn much from his experience and knowledge. Once, a fire alarm went off while I was alone with Swede in the office. I had been recopying notes while he read a book, perhaps to prepare for his usual review column. As the buzzer screamed and echoed through the cinder block walls, he simply stood up and said *Well, come on...* Nothing else. When I was alone with Hillburn and Myers later that day, they were quite reassuring: *they'll come around, Scott. Swede's just quiet. He's been here longer than all of us. Clarence, too. We'll see if he's willing to let you watch him cover a sports event. That might help. It just takes time.*

It would take time, of course, and I had so much to learn about this place and these inmates and their daily practice of writing and editing *The Angolite*. It wasn't just the air conditioning in the office or the relative freedom that they had as trustees or *Angolite* staffers that made this role so meaningful to them. It was clear to me that the main reason each writer did this job was to have something meaningful in their lives within LSP, something that they could connect to and that would allow them to contribute to their forced community. Although their positions on the staff did not negate their role as prisoners, these men were able to see themselves as having at least a degree of agency, a way of seeing themselves as more than just their assigned inmate number or a prison statistic. While these men are completely contained by the prison and will most likely die behind bars, their words have the chance to make it past the main gates and swamps. They are recognized by both inmates and free readers as *writers, researchers, experts*. And for them, that is enough.

*

It is the third Sunday of October. For the past two Sundays, I have observed staffers planning stories, interviewing participants, and taking photographs at the rodeo. A large section of the next issue is dedicated to rodeo and hobbycraft coverage. It is incredibly exciting to walk

with these men around the rodeo facility and watch what they do. I get to see the rodeo from a unique perspective; even though I grew up around horses and other livestock, this experience is different. At times, I am within feet of the holding pens where the bulls are kept. I am introduced to some of the riders. While staff members have different opinions about the nature of the rodeo, they all seem to enjoy the change of pace. *It's different. It breaks up the monotony. We don't see many folks from outside the prison often.* Hillburn and Myers again note the importance of the revenue that inmate groups earn from selling concessions; it allows groups such as the Lifers' Club and other inmate organizations to keep going.

The previous week, there was some confusion about my access. I was told by Warden Fontenot to simply drive through the main gate like everyone else who attends, park, and then find the press gate. An administrator would meet me there to escort me in, as I was not a ticket holder. I arrived early. I couldn't easily find who I was supposed to meet, and I did not want the *Angolite* staffers who were already inside the rodeo facility to think I stood them up; they had already sacrificed a great deal to allow me to watch and listen to them. No one at the press window knew about me either. So I drove back to the field house facility, a building about a quarter of a mile away. There was a reception there before each rodeo for prison staff and guests, and perhaps I would find someone to clear up the situation. Eventually, everything was straightened out with the help of a guard, and I meet up with my contact back at the rodeo arena. Later in the week, I mentioned this to Warden Fontenot; I told her that I planned to come back up on Sunday, and all seemed well. As long as she knew that I was coming, I had access – as we had agreed upon months ago. No problem.

As I drive through the main gate today, I stop my car and ask a guard if there was a message left for me. He knows nothing about my project, and I don't really expect him to. It's

rodeo day; thousands of visitors will pass through the gate. The guards' job is to make sure all is smooth, and I realize that I am a low priority for them. At least for now. I am waved through after they take a brief look inside my car; this search is nothing like when I come up during the week, but again, it is rodeo day. They have to keep traffic moving.

I pull up to the crossroad. A left turn leads to the rodeo facility; a right turn leads past Point Lookout and down to the ranch house. If I keep going straight down this road, I will end up at the education building where I meet with tutors. I am running a little behind schedule today, and I don't want to be delayed with another mix up about my access. Traffic is backing up, and it will be difficult if not impossible to trek back to the ranch house or the main gate or anywhere to find out the situation if I turn left now and go to the rodeo facility. I'll be even later, and, again, I don't want to make the *Angolite* staffers wait on me. So, I do what I think is best. I see a guard in the distance off to the right; I pull over and wave for him to come over.

I introduce myself and pull out my driver's license. I explain that Warden Fontenot knows I am coming to observe the *Angolite* staffers and the rodeo. I want to make sure that someone is ready to escort me inside the facility. All of this, I think, is the best move – *let everyone know what you are doing*. I don't want to cause trouble; I just want to meet up with the staff.

Like the other guard at the main gate, he knows nothing about my project but kindly offers to radio a warden for clarification. I ask him to contact Warden Fontenot for me, since that would be the most direct communication. *Please tell her that I can meet her or a representative wherever – the field house, the press gate, right here...whatever is easiest for her*. He steps away to use his radio.

But here is where I make a mistake. Before he calls, I ask if I can walk down just a few yards – not all the way – towards Point Lookout while he finds out the procedure. I tell him that I was at a funeral there this past week. I would still be within his eyesight. I have nothing in my hands. He says nothing, so I simply stand there. He walks off a few yards and makes the radio call. I can't clearly hear what he says. In a few minutes, he comes back to tell me that there is nothing at the ranch house for me. An odd answer.

I ask if I may drive down to the rodeo facility and try to find Warden Fontenot. I know that this will take even more time, but I figure that this would be the best move at present. The guard says that this is fine, and I get back in my car and slowly drive towards the rodeo. I'm thinking that all is well, that Warden Fontenot or a representative will be right there waiting for me and I will be able to meet up with the staffers. Again, no problem.

Less than half-a-minute later, I see his police car race up behind me. His lights are on and the siren is blasting. I immediately pull my car over and make sure my hands are on the wheel. I roll down the window.

Mr. Whiddon, do you have a ticket for today's rodeo? he asks. I tell him that I don't, exactly what I told him a few minutes before.

Warden Fontenot has told me to escort you to the main gate. You are not to return to Angola.

At this point, my heart races. I want to scream. But that would be the most foolish thing that I could do, so I simply say *Yes, sir*. He follows me back to the main gate. I am fuming inside.

Traffic is already backed up; the guard gets out of his car and tells me that we will have to wait a moment until he can stop traffic and let me out. I cannot believe that this is happening.

I ask the guard if he would ask Warden Fontenot to contact me at home as soon as she could. He agrees. The traffic opens; I drive away.

*

As soon as I get back to Baton Rouge, I call my director and try to slowly explain what happened. She is out of town, but patiently listens. She advises me to calm down and to write an email to Warden Fontenot explaining the misunderstanding. So I write to her and offer an apology. I explain, again, that I had trouble the previous week with access to the facility and ask if we could talk later in the week about what happened.

I don't expect a reply until the next day, but a few minutes later I receive an email from Fontenot. My on-site research has been terminated. She claims that she had no idea that I was coming up today and that I told the guard that I had permission to roam the prison unescorted. She also accuses me of trying to take photographs of the prison – that I was told to go directly to the press gate. She writes that she cannot trust me because I circumvent rules.

And here is where I begin to get really confused. The question of the camera seems truly bizarre; wouldn't the guard see that? I don't even own a camera. And that she had no idea that I was coming to the rodeo? And that I would say that I had permission to go wherever I wished? I send another email the next day. I offer another apology and another explanation about access confusion, but I state that I didn't have a camera and that I asked the guard for help so that everything would be smooth. I also try to call her office to no avail.

Finally, I get an email. I am accused as a liar. I am told not to contact them anymore.

*

This narrative is difficult for me to write.

I have replayed the scenes over and over in my mind, wondering what I could have done differently. I go back and forth from blaming the LSP administration to blaming myself. I have been told by several people – lawyers, former volunteers – that my project would have eventually been cut anyway, for some reason, and that fighting for access now would be a waste of time and energy. An acquaintance tells me months later in private that she had also attempted a prison ethnography/oral history project, only to be shut down at the last minute with no explanation whatsoever. I understand that the prison is a place that must be watched constantly, especially when people from outside the prison are allowed to visit a specific part for a specific event. If anything is viewed as a threat, it must be dealt with. It is their word against mine, and my word would lose.

But what frustrates me most is this: in the months after this event, I had no idea what the tutors or the staffers were told. I had no opportunity to explain myself in person to them or to the administration. Instead of getting a chance to represent myself to all parties involved, I was cut from the conversation. I would never be able to tell the men who were beginning to really trust me, to tell me their stories about their writing and their work and their lives why I wasn't there that day. Or the following week. Or ever.

Hollywood's voice remains in my mind: *Are you gonna write a book about us and then leave and then never come see us again?*

Throughout Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*, she argues that what happens to the observer must be accounted for, must be made known "if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood" (6). Behar calls this approach "vulnerable writing"; such a practice is not mere academic navel-gazing, but rather an attempt to use a personal voice to guide readers into social issues. "Emotion" Behar notes, "has only recently

gotten a foot inside the academy and we still don't know whether we want to give it a seminar room, a lecture hall, or just a closet we can air out now and then" (16). In Behar's work, she reflects upon the experiences and struggles of her research participants as well as her own journey towards understanding them not as distant, detached others but as equals contributing to a body of knowledge.

This game of representation is both slippery and difficult. *The Angolite* attempts to represent the lives and concerns of inmates held at Louisiana State Penitentiary. Ethnographic researchers, in a similar manner, carry a great responsibility in how they represent both their participants and their own experiences. In my own case, the staffers and tutors trusted me enough to allow me to search for meaning in them, their work, and, in the end, in myself. Considering the powerful gaze that controls every moment of an inmate's life as well as the staff's and tutors' fears of misrepresentation that I mentioned in an earlier interchapter, I now understand the risk that all of the participants took in their willingness to share with me.

In my first interchapter, I mentioned a handmade sign that Prejean notes on her first drive to Angola to counsel a man who will be executed for murder: *Do not despair, you will soon be there*. There is indeed a danger in confusing the roles of researcher and missionary, scholar and healer. Yet I know that all of these writers and tutors have deeply affected my life and the ways that I understand the power of writing. They have hurt people in ways I cannot imagine. They are aware that no matter what they write or whom they help, the lives that they have wrecked cannot be mended. Yet they write, and teach, and work anyway. It is what they have chosen to do as a way to make some sort of meaning out of wreckage and despair.

Despite their offenses, few have their courage.

Epilogue: Lights Out – Some Final Remarks

Because this study is, at its essence, a story about a prison and a group of inmate-writers serving lengthy sentences, it cannot have a happy ending.

While I strongly believe in the power of reading and writing in transforming lives, a power that I saw working in the *Angolite* staffers that I interviewed and observed and in the numerous accounts of inmates that I read in *The Angolite*, I realize that literacy education cannot completely trump economic conditions or other factors that produce violent crime. Such a belief is naïve at best and fails to take note of the complexity of economic and social factors that produce both criminal activity and low-level literacy. Furthermore, despite my commitment to prisoner education (a commitment I will further enact by volunteering as a tutor at a juvenile detention facility in Lexington, Kentucky while teaching at Transylvania University and by continuing my research on prison-based writing communities), I realize that the problem of low-level literacy rates in our own prisons cannot be solved easily and quickly. Derrick Corley, an inmate and activist/writer held at Clinton Corrections Facility in New York, offers a succinct description of the current situation concerning literacy and penalty:

... many prisoners either lack the basic literacy skills to put their thoughts into words or they just don't feel they write well enough to get out their feelings and ideas. Access to prison education programs is often blocked, so there is little opportunity for prisoners to learn more writing skills that would help them get across some of these barriers to communication (Sabo et al., 107).

To focus our lens closer to home for a moment, it is clear that despite the widespread improvements in the general quality of life at Louisiana State Penitentiary (much of which can be attributed to current Warden Burl Cain), there is much that can be improved concerning Angola and literacy education. According to an Institutional Averages report used as source

material for an *Angolite* article in 2003, the overall Reading Grade Point Average for available test scores (4,335 out of 5,110 inmates) was a 5.8 on a 12 point scale. 70% of the tested inmates read below a sixth grade level – a percentage that falls below the national statistics on inmate reading ability as reflected in the National Adult Literacy Survey’s discussion of inmate literacy skills. 13% of Angola inmates read between sixth and ninth grade levels, and only 9% read on a twelfth grade level or higher. There are two basic tracks for inmate education currently in place at Louisiana State Penitentiary. The “Literacy” program, designed for inmates who score below 4.9 on the M level Test of Adult Basic Education, has only 71 students at present, with 10 on a waiting list. 157 inmates are enrolled in the General Education Degree program, with 26 on a waiting list. None of these courses are currently taught by accredited English teachers.

Instead, 43 inmate tutors – many of whom I met during my fieldwork at LSP – are in charge of day-to-day course work and, when time and situation allows, individual mentoring. On average, each inmate tutor works with 20 students in either the Literacy or G.E.D. programs. While I champion the work of these tutors, it is difficult to see any long-term commitment on behalf of the state of Louisiana in offering meaningful educational opportunities when considering the absolute lack of paid, trained teachers at LSP. The tutors I met with during my field work (see Interchapter Two) often noted the lack of enough textbooks and other materials to go around and the wide range of needs from student to student in each of the two tracks available. Other tutors felt that it was difficult to maintain consistency with their students because inmates are often transferred to different sections of the prison.⁶⁴ While this dissertation is not specifically focused on inmate education, I hope that my analysis of a community of prison writers shows the importance of self-representation – the ability to render one’s own ideas and

⁶⁴ The information in this paragraph was provided by *The Angolite*. Statistical data accounting for vocational programs such as graphic communications, horticulture, culinary arts, automotive technology, carpentry, and welding were not available to me during my research.

emotions through the powerful act of writing, to contribute to one's own community, to speak as opposed to being spoken for.

As I noted in my introduction, there has been recent academic interest in the literature of confinement – an interest that seems incredibly pertinent considering both the dramatic increase in the national prison population as well as the general abandonment of rehabilitation and educational programs within our prison system: “U.S. prisons are now places for ‘incapacitation’ and retribution. Social engineering, the original and rather utopian goal of prisons, is all but dead. People see and endorse prisons for what they are: brutal warehouses” (Sabo et al., 247). Edited academic collections such as D. Quentin Miller’s *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* as well as anthologies of inmate writing such as *Couldn’t Keep it to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters* draw attention to writing by and about inmates in the United States and work against the popular argument that prisons should only be places of exile and punishment rather than rehabilitation in the best sense of the word. And as I noted in my introduction, Linda LaBranche’s current project on *The Angolite* (and specifically the work of Wilbert Rideau) will also help draw academic attention to both the overall story of the prison press and the importance of *The Angolite* to the Angola prison population.

My own analysis contributes to this growing body of texts as well as the field of literacy studies by focusing on the longest running prison publication in the United States, based in one of our most historically troubled prisons. It offers a close look at how inmates can use literacy to appeal for improved conditions and increased opportunities for education and connections to the outside world and to identify prison problems such as violent sexual assault behind bars. As a publication, it challenges dominant representations of inmates as worthless and violent brutes; while staffers do not deny violence or other difficulties within their forced community, they offer

representations that ask readers to see inmates as human beings. As a group of writers, they carefully navigate the various needs and demands of their range of audiences – fellow inmates, administrators and other immediate and local power figures such as guards, readers outside the prison space – and get their message out into the world; while these writers may never see the outside world again, their words and ideas make it across the razor wire and swamps that divide Angola and the free world. Furthermore, my analysis shows how literacy practices can indeed help inmates fight against the overwhelming despair that is synonymous with a long-term prison sentence. Former Angola Chief of Security Walter Pence notes that in the numbing and often brutal world of the maximum security prison, “The easiest thing for a prisoner is to simply be a criminal. To be right and do right requires considerable effort, courage, and even sacrifice on the part of the inmate” (Butler and Harrison, *Rage and Reform*, 163). In short, the staff members of *The Angolite* have taken on and succeeded with an incredibly difficult task; as I note throughout this dissertation, they have let time serve them rather than simply serving time.

There are additional themes contained within *The Angolite* to be investigated further. For example, their coverage of intramural sports events at LSP – a practice that has been part of *The Angolite* throughout its entire history – offers an interesting vantage point into a form of masculinity performance that, as Sabo notes in his own work about sports in prisons, “is both a source of personal liberation and social control” (65). *Angolite* articles that offer historical accounts of Louisiana State Penitentiary, such as the accounts of Point Lookout or the Red Hat barracks that I mentioned earlier in this dissertation, deserve a closer look; the history of Angola, told from the vantage point of inmates serving life or virtual life sentences, renders another layer in this process of self-representation within a complex network of power relations. Furthermore, the discussion of legal issues within *The Angolite* – especially death penalty litigation and the

publication's role in drawing attention to the horrors of the electric chair as a form of execution – is an interesting set of texts that deserves scholarly attention; I hope to partner with a legal scholar to develop a close analysis of these texts. Another set of more recent articles from 2005 and 2006 that discuss the transfer of prisoners kept in New Orleans and other areas of the Gulf Coast to LSP after Hurricane Katrina, as well as the tightening of Louisiana corrections' budgets in the wake of the storm, are also quite interesting. Finally, *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison* – while not an inmate publication but certainly important for both its popularity and Wilbert Rideau's participation – deserves scholarly attention as an important text of prison representation which has only been briefly examined in the larger context of documentary film by Janet Holtman. Attention to these sets of articles as well as other acts of inmate self-representation will not only further develop an awareness of *The Angolite* and the penal press in general but also will help educators at all levels understand more about how writers located in marginalized positions can enter dominant discourses – an ongoing and worthwhile conversation amongst compositionists and literacy educators.

There are a number of current projects, both in the United States and abroad, that challenge the divide between prisons and the free world, that work toward a penal system that does more than simply warehouses inmates and that potentially produces more crime and violence, and that attempt to provide meaningful venues for inmate voices. For example, in 2005, the National Union for Journalists in the United Kingdom partnered with educators to design and implement a series of writing courses called "Pathways to Journalism." Originally a one-year pilot program at Wandsworth Prison (the largest prison in London), the program has been approved by the National Open College Network and has been made available to all prisons all over England and Wales. Founded by NUJ General Secretary Jeremy Dear and writer Anne

Redmon, the program provides several levels of writing instruction, from basic writing to graduate level work in journalism: “What we both had was the belief that in every prison, there were those that could tell a brilliant story, write, edit, design, and illustrate with flair and imagination and, that, given a chance, could improve their skills, their self-esteem and gain a new confidence” (“NUJ Prison Journalism”). Like Eleanor Novek’s work with women prison-journalists in the United States that I discussed in Chapter Three, this program is not only designed to help inmates gain writing skills but also to help participants begin to view themselves as critical learners who can contribute to their own communities; Dear and Redmon’s rapidly expanding program “is rooted in the belief in the power of education as a social good and the belief that all of us have something to offer” (“NUJ Prison Journalism”).⁶⁵ Such programs incorporate a learning-by-doing pedagogical stance and challenge the divide between the inmate world and the academy.

Closer to our own shores, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* provides both a print and online forum for prisoners and former prisoners to circulate both creative and scholarly pieces that respond to their experiences with the criminal justice system.⁶⁶ Based in Ottawa, Canada, the non-profit journal strives to inform public opinions about the realities of incarceration and to connect prisoners, educators, students, and inmate advocates in the discussion about incarceration both in the Western hemisphere and other parts of the world. Like *The Angolite* and the few remaining other prison news publications, although somewhat more scholarly in appearance and peer reviewed by academic readers as well as inmates, *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* produces “discourse that competes with incomplete, popular, and conventional definitions and constructions of prisoners and methods of social control” (“Mission”). Founded in 1987 and

⁶⁵ For details on this interesting project, see <http://www.nujtraining.org.uk/index.html>

⁶⁶ See <http://www.jpp.org/index.html> for more information on this journal.

with 20 issues in print, the journal “attempts to acknowledge the accounts, experiences, and criticisms of the criminalized by providing an educational forum that allows women and men to participate in the development of research that concerns them directly” (“Mission”). It has published pieces by popular American inmate writers such as Mumia Abu-Jamal as well as prisoners in Nigeria, Australia, Ireland, and Canada and provides a bridge between the ivory tower of academia and the clandestine and all-too-often ignored world of the prison.

While resistance and protest in hopes to reform American prisons might seem futile, there are a number of localized grassroots community efforts to help raise awareness about prison issues and, specifically, the problems concerning access to reading materials in both penitentiaries and jails. One outstanding example of such work is the Prisoners Literature Project, based in Berkeley, California.⁶⁷ Run entirely by volunteers and funded by donations, the project sends free books to prisoners in California correctional facilities. Because libraries, as I noted in Chapter Three, are often considered an inmate privilege rather than a right and because many prisons do not allow inmates to receive books from individuals (forcing them to purchase books directly by mail from publishers and bookstores), the Prisoners Literature Project – and their connections to local booksellers – fulfills a strong need in California prisons. This project has also been supported by other grassroots efforts such as a benefit album called *Kitestringing* (a word used in prisons to describe secret letter writing and delivery) released in 2006 by AK Press and featuring a number of independent punk rock bands. My own attempts at fund raising, such as the book drive and benefit concert that I noted in my introduction, were aimed at goals similar to theirs: to provide reading materials not normally offered within prison libraries (such as historical accounts and reference guides as well as novels and poetry) and to

⁶⁷ See www.prisonersliteratureproject.com

attract the attention of both my scholarly and local community to the needs of inmates in our own state. I plan on continuing such efforts along with my future research and service.

We need more programs like these – both within our prisons and in communities that are marginalized and written off as mere breeding grounds for crime and poverty. Community writing projects such as *The Angolite* offer not only an opportunity for individual writers to improve their skills in various genres but also as a way to see themselves and their world as meaningful and worthy of discussion. As I noted at the beginning of this study, I do not argue that men and women who commit violent crimes should not be punished, nor do *Angolite* writers and contributors posit such an argument. However, the various systems that have transformed prisons into mere holding pens instead of sites of personal rehabilitation, that restrict inmate access to reading and writing and other educational opportunities, that profit from prison overcrowding and penal labor in the name of “job training,” deserve critique from both the academy and the general public.⁶⁸ *The Angolite*, one of the few remaining prisoner written and edited publications in the United States, helps draw both scholarly and general public attention to such issues.

Perhaps the most important element that *The Angolite*, and all existing prison-writing programs, offers to inmate readers and writers is *hope*. In my ethnographic fieldwork with inmates at LSP as well as in my close reading of *Angolite* articles, it became quite clear to me that the most valuable commodity in a place that numbs and controls is hope. Hope is a key component – maybe even the most crucial component – in the long and labored self-transformation of docile bodies into writers and readers who can, as inmate educator and activist Shaun Griffin argues, “take back some part of their lives” (“Teaching in a Prison” 14) and enact at least a small degree of agency, despite the overwhelming difficulty and desperation that is

⁶⁸ See Parenti for a keen analysis of this final point.

produced by the prison environment. By participating in the activities of *The Angolite*, staffers have a way of improving their own quality of life as well as the lives of their fellow inmates – both at LSP and in other penal institutions. They have a forum to articulate their own concerns and provide a space for other inmate writers to contribute creative works. They insist that their voices, as well as the voices of other inmates that contribute to the publication, matter. Their writing becomes a means of construction of a self that is able to contribute to their own immediate community and even the larger society. Through writing, they have a way to be recognized as authoritative and trustworthy in their accounts and representations. While such acts of resistance might seem tiny when faced with the immensity of the prison-industrial complex as well as contemporary public attitudes that support harsher and longer sentences with few opportunities for inmate personal growth, the daily decision that their work as writers and editors truly matters is a powerful resistance to popular representations of inmates and the despondency that is often a product of incarceration.

I began this study with a passage from Bob Dylan. To close, I'd like to evoke another one of my own writer-heroes; in a recent interview, Bruce Springsteen states that it is easy to be “overwhelmed by ambivalence, by the despair of the day. [But] that's what people use music and film and art for; that's its purpose. Its purpose is to pull you up out of that despair, to shine a light on new possibilities” (Tucker). *The Angolite*, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, has served a number of purposes for a range of audiences for over five decades. It has worked to pull both its own writers and inmate readers out of despair, to provide hope for the hopeless. It uses writing to shine a light on the problems that plague our nation's prisons and the possibilities that inmates have for transformation and redemption.

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